

Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 4

Sakon Kaidou

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Illustrator: Taiki



4. Franklin's Game

Infinite 4D endrogram



Infinite Endrogram

4, Franklin's Game

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"Why the rush, dear listener? Take the time to listen to the song. It's your requiem, after all."

"You're in the way, so just die already."

"Do your worst... newbie!"

"My fist is going straight to your face. Keep it clean for me, Superior."

"...I have no idea what you mean. Regardless, I'll have you freeze where you stand."

"...I think I hate you."

(Giga Professor) Franklin
V.S.
(Paladin) Ray

(King of Orchestras) Veldorbell
V.S.
(Anti-Orchestra) Marie Adieu

(High Pilot) Hugo
V.S.
(Pilot) Rook

Character

Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



Nemesis

Nemesis

A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword or a halberd, and is equipped with skills such as Vengeance is Mine, which damages enemies for twice as much as they damage Ray.



Rook

Rook Holmes

An astonishingly beautiful boy in Ray's party. His job is "Pimp" and he fights using his tamed monsters. His Embryo is the Type Guardian "Depraved Devil, Babylon."



Marie

Marie Adler

A Journalist player working for the information organization called "DIN," giving her access to lots of various info. Having gained an interest in him, she now accompanies Ray, who has a tendency to be at the center of large incidents.



Shu

Shu Starling / Shuichi Mukudori

Ray's brother and the one who invited him to the game. He wears a suit because, during character creation, he accidentally made himself look just like he does in real life.

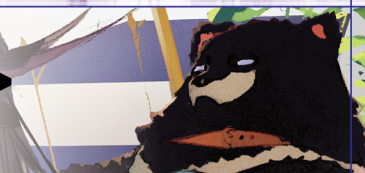


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Continuation: Inside Their Minds

Three hours before The Clash of the Superiors, Count Gideon's residence

Gideon's first district was a gathering of official buildings and institutions. Among them were the knight offices, right next to which was the residence of the local ruler: Count Gideon.

Due to both buildings sharing a similar design focused on steadiness and modesty, most would've assumed that Count Gideon's mansion was nothing but an extension of the offices. This was because the first Count Gideon had believed that the spirit of Gideon lied within its arenas, and that gaudy castles wouldn't fit the city's character.

However, many matches since then had been attended by royalty and other guests of honor, making it necessary for the Gideons to build a luxurious guest house for them to stay in.

Thus, the residence of Count Gideon was a curious structure with a modest main building and a fancy annexe. The main office of said modest building was currently occupied by three people wearing serious facial expressions.

One was the young Count Gideon, Aschbarray Gideon.

One was the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Royal Guard, the Paladin Liliana Grandria.

And the last one was the second princess of the Kingdom of Altar, Elizabeth S. Altar.

They were among the most important tians currently present in the city.

Elizabeth broke the silence. "So my older sister isn't coming?"

"Yes." Count Gideon nodded. "I've been informed that she is currently unwell and could not heal in time to depart for Gideon today. Apparently, there's an Epidemic happening in the capital." He was passing on to them what he'd been told via communication magic from the capital.

Elizabeth had arrived at this city to attend the great event happening this evening — The Clash of the Superiors. But it had originally been planned that her older sister, the current leader of the country, would attend it as well.

"An Epidemic..." sighed Liliana while covering her mouth and making a sour expression.

“Epidemic” was a term used to describe any sudden diseases that spread among the weak and strong alike. Masters saw it as an unpatterned, irregular, widespread *Infinite Dendrogram* event. There were various Epidemics that covered many large areas, creating sufferers among both Masters and tians. Though some went away with the passage of time, some required special healing methods such as vaccines or healing magic available only to Superior Jobs.

Fortunately, the Epidemic that had spread through the kingdom this time wasn’t life-threatening, being more like a common cold than any other disease.

However, Epidemics completely ignored all stats and resistances. Even high-level Masters would become bedridden or simply log out until the disease went away. They were considered to be natural disasters above human knowledge. Indeed, it was quite fortuitous that the damage being done by the current Epidemic was so meager.

Still, Count Gideon, the host of today’s event, could barely hide his chagrin about its inconvenient timing, and Liliana shared his sentiment.

There had been trouble caused by Elizabeth sneaking out of the building yesterday, but most of the official business and preparations relating to the event were already done.

Most of it had had to do with the arrival and welcoming of Elizabeth’s older sister, first princess Altimia, and now it had all gone to waste. Being an older sister herself, Liliana tried to be considerate of Elizabeth’s feelings about this.

“I see! Very well!” Elizabeth said with a voice that made it seem like Liliana’s worries had been misplaced. “It’s a shame, but we should not dwell on what we can do nothing about! Now, we should be thinking about how to make this event a success! Am I right, Count Gideon?!”

“Indeed you are!” he said heartily.

Elizabeth’s words were full of resolve. Though her beloved sister couldn’t come, she was determined to do her duty, in the hopes that it would help her sister.

“Your Highness...” muttered Liliana. Though Elizabeth’s current bearing wasn’t completely unlike her, the lady knight felt as if there was something different about her — as if she had become more of an adult.

Perhaps something happened when she sneaked out yesterday? Liliana wondered.

Suddenly, Elizabeth grabbed her hand in both of hers. “Liliana, I want you to protect me!” she declared.

“...Of course! I will keep you safe no matter what happens,” replied Liliana, fully ready to fulfill her duty.

She would protect the girl under any circumstances — no matter what awaited them.

Chapter One: “The Weakest, The Worst” Superior

Journalist/Death Shadow, Marie Adler

I knew about the top three of the Dryfe Imperium’s rankings before the war even happened. Being both a Journalist and a player killer, I had to be fully informed about the strongest Masters.

The tops of Dryfe’s duel, kill, and clan rankings were all cut from different cloths.

The commander of devilish armies was the Hell General, Logan Goddhart, the “Contradictory Equation.”

The one bearing the greatest stats was the King of Beasts, the “Physically Strongest.”

Finally, the leader of the imperium’s top clan was the Triangle of Wisdom, Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin.

The only one out of the three who hadn’t been a Superior at the time of the war was Franklin. Not only that, his only job was a non-battle job, and he had stats that put him below even the average low-rank battle job. Comparing him to King of Beasts the “Physically Strongest” or The Earth the “Magically Strongest” made him seem absolutely meaningless.

Of course, unlike the other rankings, clan rankings were focused on the scopes of the clans.

Though the leader of a top clan lacking power was curious, it had absolutely no impact on the clan’s position.

Most thought that, in war, the person at the top of the clan rankings was supposed to show their ability through the whole clan, rather than as an individual. But to everyone’s surprise, the result had been entirely different. What the war had shown was not the fearsomeness of the Triangle of Wisdom, but of Franklin himself.

Despite not being a Superior at that point in time, he definitely hadn’t been outdone by the other two.

The Superior Job of Giga Professor specialized in monster research, while Franklin’s Embryo, Pandemonium, specialized in monster production.

Though focused on the same subject, research and production were completely different things, and Franklin combined them to create monsters with many various qualities.

Some were immune to physical attacks, some reflected magic,

some exploded when nearing death, some latched on and assumed control, etcetera, etcetera...

The ones who had faced Franklin's wicked band had been the few kingdom's Masters who'd participated in the war and the kingdom's own army. When both sides clashed, the results had been simply tragic.

The fact that every monster was a wild card with unpredictable abilities had quickly brought disorder into the kingdom's ranks, which had left them open to the specially-made monsters that rivaled Superior Jobs in power. Naturally, they had made short work of the kingdom's Masters and gone on to feast on the king himself.

The price of making this monstrous army had no doubt been astronomical, for the necessary funds to acquire the materials required for monster creation were great. However, for Franklin, who was the top of Dryfe's largest clan and also had the backing of the imperium itself, money was no issue. That allowed him and his clan to participate in the war at full capacity and demonstrate just how fearsome an individual he was.

After the war, I, as a PKer... as the Superior Killer... had received many requests for Franklin's murder.

The ones making the requests had been Masters who'd been pushed into the death penalty by him, or friends and family of the tian soldiers who'd died. I had rejected each and every one of these requests.

Of course, I hadn't neglected to consider them. If he was a foe I could kill, I would just do it. But that simply wasn't the case.

With a single glance, I knew that I could kill him easily, but I couldn't do it because I knew that *something bad would happen if I did*.

Some time had passed since I'd refused those requests. The people who'd made them weren't the only ones with a grudge against Franklin. Many had tried attacking him themselves, and though most of them had been destroyed by his monsters, one person had actually defeated him.

Considering Franklin's poor stats, it hadn't been exactly unexpected. However, what had happened afterwards was simply off. After returning from his death penalty, Franklin had hunted down the one who'd killed him, fought him, and emerged victorious this time.

Then, he did it again.

And again, and again, and again.

And again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again...

Franklin had created monsters that the guy had the worst compatibility with and spent a whole month of real-world time relentlessly killing the one who'd defeated him. Eventually, the person

had stopped logging in to *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Though weak, he made the worst monsters.

Though weak, he had the worst disposition.

“The Weakest, The Worst” was my exact evaluation of him, and his most popular nickname.

In all honesty, I was aware of another good contestant for “The Worst,” but that was irrelevant here.

Anyway, his sudden appearance meant far more than just that “one of the kingdom’s irreconcilable enemies had appeared.”

There was no doubt that he was about to do something bad.



Paladin, Ray Starling

The moment Franklin named himself, countless people in the venue showered him in arrows, bullets, and offensive magic.

With him standing on the top of the barrier, many of the attacks got canceled by it. However, it was still a fearsome barrage of damage. I could even spot a number of high-rank attacks like the ones I’d seen during the matches, some of which might’ve actually been done by Superior Jobs. The barrier underneath Franklin’s feet shook wildly as explosions hit it and covered the top with smoke.

Despite bearing the brunt of the barrage, Franklin came out alive.

“Get a load of you people. Duel City folk. Hot-blooded as they come and always quick to react,” he sneered.

His lab coat being scorched here and there was proof that he’d been hit, but for some reason, it hadn’t killed him.

“Why is he alive?” I asked.

“There’s nothing special about what he’s done so far,” said Marie.

“Yeah.” Shu nodded.

I had no idea what had happened, but they seemed to have full understanding of it.

“He survived the first few critical attacks with warding accessories and equipment skills,” Marie continued.

“Then, he used Castling to shelter himself from the rest,” added Shu.

“What’s ‘Castling?’” asked Rook.

“It’s a skill that lets the user change places with one of his monsters, Rook,” explained Marie. “It’s a high-rank skill, but its effective range is so small that it’s rare for it to be used as a teleport skill. Still, merely being among the few teleport skills is enough to make it noteworthy.”

I see, I thought. So he’d survived the first attacks using the same things I’d used against the Demi-Dragon and the rest by simply disappearing away from here.

“Oh, but do be careful not to attack me anymore! Don’t wanna end up in the gaol, now, do we?” Franklin mocked.

The gaol?

Confused by his words, I focused my gaze on him. As I watched, a single songbird appeared in his arms.

“Because that’s exactly where you’re going if you accidentally hit *this* little lady,” said Franklin, and a moment later, the bird got replaced by something else — a girl, to be precise.

“Ellie!” Marie burst out, with a voice full of shock.

It was Elizabeth S. Altar — the person from the photo I’d seen yesterday and in the noble seats today. I hastily looked to the guest of honor seating and, sure enough, she wasn’t there.

“So... this guy actually made a monster that can do Castling with third parties,” said Shu.

What? Is it even possible to create something like that? I asked myself, but the answer was obvious with a single glance at the results — the second princess was out of her seat and in Franklin’s hands.

Seemingly unconscious, the girl didn’t even struggle.

“Have I made myself clear, you dumbasses?” Franklin smirked. “Royalty killers go straight to the gaol, you know? Careful not to do that... Not like I’m one to talk! Ayyyyy... HAHAHAAHAHAH!”

The man who’d killed the father of the girl in his hands laughed as though he’d just said the funniest joke in the world.

“Aaaaall righty, then,” he continued. “With your hands all tied up now, allow me to make a sug—”

Before Franklin could finish, someone in the audience launched offensive magic that exploded right next to him.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed and looked to the spell’s source, where I saw a Master doing a fist pump.

“Is he an idiot?!” Marie shouted my thoughts before I could.

The guy has the princess right next to him! You can’t be so careless about this!

“Oookaaaayyy,” Franklin said as he appeared out of the smoke caused by the explosion. Both he and the princess were unharmed, meaning that he’d done something to prevent the effects of that attack.

“Do you fail to grasp the situation?” he asked the attacker. “I have taken the princess as a hostage. I am also talking... *trying* to talk... And then there’s youuuu! Why did you attack me?! Why? I just can’t understand it! Are you an idiot? Or a hothead? Or perhaps both?”

Franklin roughly scratched his head, clearly none too pleased with the situation.

“Hotheaded idiots like you should just cool off,” he said, causing a blue liquid to gush out beneath the Master that had attacked him.

The blue liquid, the Slime, instantly surrounded the Master. “Hhh
”

It created a scene that was downright hellish.

A moment after he got consumed, both his skin and equipment melted, becoming indistinguishable from each other. He screamed, but the blue Slime’s body reduced his voice to bubbles that didn’t even make it outside. If that had been the extent of it, this Slime would’ve been much like the carnivorous slime from that one horror movie. However, it had other qualities.

Specifically, its surroundings were freezing.

Not only did it melt anything inside it — it also spread damaging frost to its surroundings.

“Say hello to my little Oxygen Slime, working title: Destroyer,” said Franklin. “Handmade by yours truly, he’s among the better ones I’ve created recently, if I say so myself.”

The tone he had while presenting the Oxygen Slime was much like that of someone submitting a cake to a cookery contest. Yet, naturally, it was nothing that hearty. The Oxygen Slime was consuming, melting, and freezing the spectators unfortunate enough to be around it. Soon enough, one of them released a surge of fire towards it.

“Good job, dum-dum,” muttered Franklin as the blaze hit the Slime and caused a large explosion.

First frost, now flame — a sizeable part of the audience seating was engulfed in a blue inferno.

“Come on now. I know that the go-to response to Slimes is fire, but I didn’t expect to see some brainlets here actually go with that. Were you even listening to me? I called it an ‘Oxygen Slime.’ Do you even know what ‘oxygen’ is? I hope for everyone’s safety that your stupid, liquid oxygen-lighting ass is forbidden from participating in experiments during science class.”

Liquid oxygen — a substance acquired by condensing oxygen gas in the extremely low temperature of minus 182.96 Celsius. It was a highly hazardous, volatile substance that had a great enough oxidation potential to see it used as rocket fuel.

“All of that blue is actually liquid oxygen...” I muttered.

“I remember having to mess with it in a chemistry class,” said Shu.

I had similar recollections. We had done experiments where we had to cool plastic bags full of oxygen using liquid nitrogen.

“By the way, there’s no point in lighting him even when you’re prepared for the explosion,” added Franklin. “Blow him up, and my boy Destroyer instantly regenerates using the oxygen in the air.” Sure enough, at the center of the explosion, there was the Oxygen Slime, quickly restoring itself until it regained its original size.

A creature that's corrosive, indestructible, and explosive... Likely among the worst monsters you could face, I thought as I noticed something.

The Masters that had died because of it had become particles and vanished. There were no corpses to be seen within the reach of the explosion.

No tians got caught up in it, it seems. What a silver lining.

"Anyway, this brainlet interference derailed us a bit, but I think I'm free to speak my demands now, yeah? Unless anyone else wants to try and play hero," he said while standing on the barrier, looking fully confident that no one would get in his way.

"Let's play a game!" he shouted as he procured a strange switch and held it in his hand.

"BEEP," he said as he pressed it, making another Oxygen Slime pop out in another part of the audience.

Thankfully, unlike the first time, no one got caught up in it, but its appearance alone was enough to make the spectators there panic and start running away from it.

"That might've been enough for you to understand, but this switch is linked to the gadgets I set. As for what they do... they release the monsters I've prepared, like my Destroyers here. One press releases one monster at random," he said, making most of the audience hastily get up and try to leave, but his words didn't end there. "By the way, even if I don't press it, *all of them* will be released in about an hour, and I have these gadgets placed *all over Gideon*."

"What?!" I heard Count Gideon sound his shock from his noble seating. It was only natural, for the town he ruled had become a target for monster terrorism.

Not only that, given his willingness to terrify the audience to the point of madness and to do such terrorism, it was quite obvious that Franklin didn't care about any potential tian casualties.

"There are two ways to stop this," Franklin said with an extremely pleased smile on his face. "Either destroy this switch or give me the death penalty. That would stop the gadgets and make all the released monsters disappear. Simple, isn't it?"

Defeating him here and now would end it all, but...

"...Strange," I muttered. "Why is he...?"

Before I could voice my question...

"Oh yeah, this has nothing to do with the monsters, but I'm taking your little princess, okay? Thanks." Franklin took the unconscious princess into his hands. "Stop the monsters and save the princess!" he shouted. "Basic enough, is it not? Do your best, O Masters of the kingdom! That would be all, then! Adieu!"

Then Franklin once again used Castling to disappear somewhere,

princess in hand.

A moment later, the venue was mired in chaos and enraged roars.

Some panicked, others screamed, others moved aimlessly in confusion. I could see some Masters dashing out of the arena in an attempt to hunt down Franklin, while some went to get rid of the two Oxygen Slimes here.

The ones who took to action shared a single sentiment — rage against Franklin, who'd started this incident and ruined tonight's event. I was no different in that regard.

"This goddamn son of a...!" I sputtered.

In Franklin's eyes, this was probably nothing but a game. Well, yes, *Infinite Dendrogram* was exactly that — a game.

However, even here, there were lines that shouldn't be crossed, and he was getting really close to doing it.

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean," said Shu while nodding. "Riddle me this, though: why does he see it necessary to announce this little game of his?"

That was the same thing I was wondering about. He claimed to have set gadgets with Oxygen Slimes and other monsters all over the arena and the rest of the city.

That meant that his act of terrorism was 100% prepared and that he could start it any time he wanted, and yet...

"Terrorism and kidnappings are usually done without any prior notice," said Shu. "Yet he went out of his way to announce it to this giant audience. Do you know what that means?"

"Well..." I said. From his mannerisms, it was obvious that Franklin was enjoying this. However, I felt that something was off... that there was more to it than it seemed.

His announcement seemed to be much like the one Xunyu had made before the start of The Clash of the Superiors. It appeared to have a hidden intention, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was.

"This is just my conjecture." Rook joined our conversation. "But I think the goal behind his announcement is to make it seem like it's possible to prevent it and *then have us fail*."

"But why?" I asked.

"It's likely that he—"

Before Rook could finish his words, we heard sounds of confusion coming not from the audience, but from outside our box — from the lobby. Listening carefully, I could make out some people saying something about a "barrier" and that they "couldn't leave."

"Let's go to the lobby," said Shu.

"...Yeah!" I nodded. Rook, Nemesis, Babi, and I all left our box. That was when I realized that Marie, who had been with us just a

moment ago, had disappeared somewhere.

In the lobby, we saw nearly a hundred Masters trying to get outside the arena. They certainly weren't the main issue here, for there was a barrier that separated the arena and the city, preventing any of them from leaving.

"Isn't that just like the barrier used in the arena?" I asked. "Did he actually...?"

"It appears that he did," nodded Nemesis.

So, besides the one that shrouded only the stage, there was also a barrier that covered the entire arena.

Franklin had taken control of it, and he had used it to prevent us, the Masters, from leaving the arena and getting in the way of his game.

"Damn it! What the hell?!" someone shouted.

"Why is a single player able to mess with the system?!" someone else yelled.

"Let us out!"

The Masters gathered here tried to leave, but alas, their efforts were in vain.

"I had a bad feeling when he shut out Figaro and Xunyu, but it looks like Franklin got total control over the barriers here," said Shu.

Can a player really...? Oh, wait, I realized.

"The barrier system is run by nothing but some ancient technology, after all," Shu continued. "It always has to be activated manually, too. That makes it possible for even us Masters to influence it and force it to do things like this, it seems."

"It appears so," said Rook. "And he started this game exactly because he's capable of this. It makes his victory absolute and the defeat of the kingdom's Masters unavoidable."

If we didn't stop the terrorism he had so loudly announced, it would mean that the Masters gathered here in Gideon had lost the game.

...All right, this is really bad, I thought.

"Let's use brute force!" shouted one of the Masters. "Lots of focused high-rank skills should be enough to break it!"

Many were quick to join him. He wasn't wrong. After all, both Xunyu and Figaro had been able to open holes in the ceiling of the barrier shrouding their fight. If enough power was applied, it shouldn't have been impossible to break it.

Soon enough, the attacks of several dozens of Masters hit the barrier.

Though it was clearly tougher than the ceiling part broken by Xunyu and Figaro, it became visibly thinner. If these attacks continued, the barrier could momentarily break and allow us to go

outside.

As most in the lobby turned hopeful, the sound of an explosion somewhere in the arena reached our ears. Not only that, but there were some destructive sounds coming from certain parts of the city, as well.

When the Masters here became puzzled about what they were hearing, an unpleasant laugh rang out around us.

“AH HA HA! Looks like we have some silly geese trying to break the barrier!”

Shortly after we looked around and tried to find the source of the voice, we found a permeable Franklin — his hologram.

“Greetings, ladies and gents. Sure hasn’t been long, has it?” he said. “Oh, what you’re seeing is our clan’s latest product. Seems useful, no? It costs 8,000,000 lir. A bit heavy on the wallet, but we’re selling these once the war is done. Drop by and get one if you feel like it.”

He presented his product and its price in a manner that was both courteous and mocking.

“Anyway, about this barrier... Having you all just get fired up and break it would’ve annoyed me, so I put a bit of a limit on it. A single attack makes one random gadget release its monster, and if you manage to break it completely, *all of them* will be released before the time limit. Oh, the same applies for the barrier on the stage, by the way.”

His words made the Masters in the lobby freeze in their tracks.

“Oh no, do carry on if you feel like it,” he said. “Though I can’t begin to care about any casualties that’d cause! Lol!”

“Damn it!” one Master shouted as he released an offensive skill towards the permeable Franklin.

Naturally, with that Franklin being just a hologram, he came out completely unhurt. However, the attack seemed to have broken the device projecting it, making his grinning mug disappear from sight. Still, whether the hologram was here or not, we could no longer rely on brute force, leaving us with nothing we could do.

“This is bad,” said Rook. “At this rate, the kingdom’s Masters will be completely defeated.”

“So what?” asked Babi. “If he wins, he will only brag about it and that’s it, right?”

“No, Babi.” Rook shook his head. “Well, it’s true that, to us Masters, it would be nothing but a meaningless defeat. However, *Infinite Dendrogram* has other sentient beings, too.”

The tians.

To them, the results of this incident might have a completely different meaning.

“I see how it is,” said Nemesis with a grave tone, clearly understanding exactly what Rook wanted to say. “At this rate, the kingdom will lose before the second war even begins.”

“Yes.” He nodded.



The City of Duels, Gideon

There was something flying over Gideon, a mere hundred meters above ground. It was a single monster.

Strangely enough, its stomach and sides both seemed to melt into the night sky, making it extremely difficult to spot with the naked eye. However, its back was covered in fur with a texture reminiscent of Persian carpets, and two people were sitting on it.

One of them was Giga Professor Mr. Franklin, the one who'd created the monster and named it “Night Lounge.” The other was the person he'd kidnapped: Elizabeth, the second princess of the Kingdom of Altar.

Having regained her consciousness right after getting put on the Night Lounge, the girl was looking at Franklin. It wasn't a hateful glare, but a puzzled stare.

“Why did you kidnap me?” she voiced her confusion.

“Oh? Does a person affiliated with the imperium, such as yours truly, really need a reason to kidnap this country's royalty?” he asked in response.

“That is not what I meant.” Elizabeth shook her head and faced him before asking. “Why are you not killing me, like you did my father?”

“Hmm. For someone who's so clearly aware of that fact, you certainly are composed.”

“May I have an answer?”

“Oh, right. That's 'cause I was told not to kill ya. Not like I would've done it if I wasn't. Anyway, I'll be cordial with you, so do calm down. Want some candy?”

“No.”

“Psh, typical.” Clearly not bothered by her harsh response to his offer, Franklin began wiping his glasses and continued talking. “If our countries peacefully merge, you'll be able to return to the royal capital, safe and sound. So, again, there's no need for you to worry.”

“And what if peace doesn't happen?” she asked.

“You'll be returning to a flattened wasteland. After all, if peace isn't an option, we're having an all-out war,” he said as he put his glasses back on again. “Well, if things go according to that lunatic's... His Majesty's plans, you'll be perfectly fine. I don't think he wants to be hated by his potential sister-in-law or the one who'd be his

empress.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“‘What,’ indeed? Well, let’s just say that your father was in the way, while you are *not*. Leave it at that.” He cut the subject short, showing absolutely no intention to emphasize.

“Then let me ask you something else,” said the princess. “Why are you attacking Gideon?”

Though the empty air around them was silent, screams and sounds of destruction could be heard coming from the ground beneath. Franklin’s pawns and the monsters that had already been released were already causing chaos in the city. She asked merely because she wished to know the reason behind such carnage and despair.

In response, Franklin formed an unpleasant grin.

“This is a side show to celebrate the end of the event we call ‘war’!” he shouted while spinning around the Night Lounge and making exaggerated arm movements. “It’s both a game and an initiation!”

“‘Initiation?’” she repeated.

“The strongest knight, the greatest sage, and the kindly, fatherly king have all died. The people are leaving. Despair is all around. There’s no future to be had here, for the kingdom is already in checkmate — everyone knows this.” Franklin brought his face so close to hers that it seemed as though he was about to touch her eyes with his tongue. “Tell me, then. Why do you think the kingdom hasn’t given up yet?”

Shocked, Elizabeth slightly backed away as Franklin made a pleased grin.

“That’s because you have your Masters.”

He lightly tapped Night Lounge’s back with the tip of his nail.

“Everyone thinks that the kingdom lost the war because most of the people on the rankings didn’t participate.”

Slowly, but surely, the joy in his tone faded until he was speaking with no emotion in his voice.

“That’s not exactly wrong. We won so easily because they weren’t there to stop us.”

He sighed, shook his head, and turned his back to Elizabeth.

“Still, you’ve gotta know when to give up. ‘We’ll win if the Masters participate in the next war,’ they say. ‘The kingdom is still undefeated,’ they proclaim. It’s a real pain in the ass. War isn’t free, you know?”

His voice was now thick with frustration.

“This Clash of the Superiors thing is the ultimate example of this. It’s just a huge ‘We can do it’ done by demonstrating the power of the kingdom’s Superiors! It’s a big old dick-measuring contest and it

PISSES! ME! OFF!"

He spouted that while looking at the central arena, which became more distant by the second.

"If, by some freak accident, this country's Superiors all participate in the next war, it's entirely possible that the situation will do a complete 180. Hell, we might even end up completely defeated."

That unpleasant fact turned his expression bitter, but that face was soon replaced by a maddened grin.

"That's why, before anything troublesome happens, I came here to break this country's spirit."

Franklin's expression was that of a hellish jester, and it seemed to take a toll on the sanity of anyone merely looking at it.

"Tell me, if the kingdom's Masters just sit around and twiddle their thumbs while a city gets destroyed and a princess gets kidnapped," he said as his grin became even wider, "would this country's tians still have any hope left for their Masters? Would they still have the willpower to resist?"

His expression still the same, he covered his face with both of his hands.

"The kingdom's liveliest city... The city with most of the kingdom's fighting power... The kingdom's strongest Over Gladiator..."

Then, as if praising something, he raised his hands to the sky and laughed out loud.

"This is the night of despair! This is when all the myths surrounding this city die!"

The laughter of the one putting Gideon in peril resounded throughout the city's skies.

"Really?" said a certain little girl with a voice that was easily drowned out by the laughter. "I do not believe you're right."

Elizabeth, having solid memories of a Master she'd spent the whole previous day with, was still hopeful.

She said quietly, "I believe that the kingdom's Masters... are people we can rely on."



Paladin, Ray Starling

"Brother Bear," spoke Nemesis. "How strong, do you think, are the kingdom's forces outside of the arena?"

"That would be the Royal Guard tasked with protecting the princess, Gideon's own knight order, and the weirdo Masters that didn't come to watch The Clash of the Superiors."

It wasn't like the Masters here in the arena were the only ones in the city. The people outside should've been able to do something about this, too, but...

“But any self-respecting battle-oriented Master came to see today’s match,” Shu continued. “The only such Masters who didn’t are the ones who couldn’t get tickets. However, that mostly happens due to monetary issues or lack of knowledge of the right people, both of which are solved naturally if you’re strong. Meaning that the Masters outside the arena tonight aren’t exactly the strongest.”

That was likely one of the reasons why Franklin picked this night — the one with The Clash of the Superiors — to seal the kingdom’s Masters inside the arena.

“There might be some tough guys who didn’t come to see the fight just because, but I bet that Franklin thought of a counter to them, too,” Shu added as he used his bear chin to point to the plaza outside the central arena.

I had no idea how long they’d been there, but there was a number of Masters and monsters in the plaza. They clearly had no intention of doing anything about the city’s chaos, making it pretty obvious that they were preparing to attack anyone leaving the arena.

“Franklin’s people, surely,” said Shu. “With those guys there and the monsters messing the city up, getting to and defeating Franklin himself will be no small task.”

“Gh...” I grumbled. There was absolutely nothing we could do about this situation. More importantly... with this barrier sealing us here, not even *I* could do anything. “If only...”

If only we... the Masters here in the arena... could get out and participate in the fight, our chances would go up.

“If this barrier wasn’t here, I...”

I slowly extended my hand towards it, holding back the urge to punch it.

With any offense on it being a trigger that released monsters, attacking it wasn’t an option. However, unable to contain my frustration, I reached to touch the barrier... and my fingers went right through it.

“...Eh?” I sounded my confusion as the nearly hundred Masters in the lobby started making noise about it.

“He... He went through!”

“What the hell?! I couldn’t do it!”

“Did the barrier disappear...? OW! It’s still here!”

“H-Hey! Does your Embryo have some barrier-related skills?!”

“N-None that I’m aware of...” I was more confused here than anyone else. There was no way I could answer that.

“Ray,” my brother addressed me.

Strangely enough, him speaking made the entire lobby instantly turn completely silent.

I heard someone whisper things like “Oh, it’s that costume guy,”

“So kid mountain also came to watch the fight,” and “The bear wasn’t an NPC?” My brother seemed to be strangely famous.

However, none of that mattered right now. What mattered was that, despite him wearing the suit, I could tell that he was looking directly at me.

“What’s your total level?” he asked.

“Total level?” Puzzled, I repeated those words before answering. “It’s 41.” My answer made the Masters in the lobby realize something and talk amongst themselves. Meanwhile, my brother...

“Khah... HAHAHAH!”

...laughed out loud.

“Of course!” he cried. “This is an arena’s barrier, after all! Of course you can pass it!”

“Bro, I’m completely lost here.”

“Oh, it’s really simple. Arena barriers prevent people going in and out of them. Otherwise, they’d be completely meaningless and make spectating duels into a life-threatening activity. However, that means absolutely nothing to people with a total level of 50 or below, who can’t participate in duels *because they pass through the barriers.*”

“...Oh!”

Yeah, well, I looked it up and found out that you can only participate when your total level is 51 or above.

Those were my own words from yesterday. People with a total level of 50 or below couldn’t participate in duels because they could freely pass through the barriers.

“I see. That means that...!” Rook, me, and the other few low-level Masters here could leave the arena and go help the people outside.

“Search the arena and get the help of all the Masters level 50 or below!” my brother called.

“Supporters with levels 51 and above, hit the newbies with buffs and autoheals! The rest of you, go take care of the monsters messing up the arena!”

“All right! We now have a way to indirectly slap that shitty lab coat!”

Once aware of this opportunity, the veteran Masters were quick to react, becoming battle-ready in but a moment.

“You are aware of what this means, yes?” Rook asked Shu.

“Yeah,” Shu nodded. “As one who can control the barrier, Franklin is surely aware of this loophole. However, he didn’t say anything along the lines of ‘I’ll release the monsters if you leave the arena,’ meaning that he left this loophole on purpose.”

It was pretty obvious that Franklin was a huge bastard and had a high degree of thoroughness in his plans, meaning that this loophole was here for a reason.

Even so...

“Ray.”

“...Bro.”

Before I'd realized it, he was standing right next to me. He was looking at me with seriousness that was obvious even though he wore a bear suit.

“We have a loophole. However, it's extremely likely that it's one of his traps, and even if it isn't, the things awaiting you are skilled players, an army of monsters, and he himself — a Superior.”

“Mh...”

Franklin was a Superior — the same tier as Figaro and Xunyu, both of which had displayed immense power in their duel. That meant that I was about to get into a predicament that would surpass my deadly battles against UBMs, and even the time when the Superior Killer had given me the death penalty. I might be heading straight to my second death penalty. In fact, that would be the natural outcome.

But still, I...

“There's no doubt that you're gonna die... Will you still go?” my brother asked.

“Let me ask *you* something, instead, bro. Right before my eyes, a girl was kidnapped and a town is being destroyed. Letting it happen would give me the worst aftertaste in my mouth. Do you think I'm a sensible enough individual to give up and do nothing?”

I happened to be someone who didn't know when to quit. I'd keep reaching for the light for as long as I could.

“I knew you'd say that.” Shu chuckled and gave me something. It was an item reminiscent of another time — a Dragonscale Ward. “I'm out of Brooches. This is all I can give you... Take it.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“I'll join you when the barrier's dealt with,” he said. “You can overdo stuff all you want, but make sure you're alive by the time I come. And I *will* come — you can count on that.”

“Yeah. I'll be relying on you... Shu.”

Not too long after that, the preparations were done. Rook and I were surrounded by other Masters who'd yet to hit level 51. They amounted to a total of twenty-two. Though relatively powerless and aware of it, all of them were Masters who'd volunteered to help end Franklin's plans. That display of will alone made them seem reliable.

And to the right of me, I had the companion I relied on more than anyone else.

“Let's go, Ray,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah,” I replied as I took her hand, after which she transformed into the familiar black greatsword.

“Time for a retaliation!”

Then the twenty-four of us newbies all charged towards the board of the game set up by that foul Superior.

Let the quest begin!

Chapter Two: Irregular Newbies

The central arena's lobby, ten minutes before the newbies went out to battle

In the central arena, the veteran Masters were gathering and preparing the newbies that would leave the barrier and go to battle. At the same time, they were using their Embryos and skills to gather information regarding the forces they'd face.

Rook, being one of those who would head to battle, made his own preparations.

"So we're about to fight other players..." he muttered.

"Yep," said Babi.

The battle he was about to partake in wasn't just a sparring match under the protection of the arena barriers.

Failure would mean getting the death penalty and being removed from the ranks of those struggling against the chaos in the city.

If that happened, Rook would be unable to help Ray, which was something he couldn't tolerate.

"At least we have *some* experience in this," he muttered.

Fighting the player killers outside the arena wouldn't be Rook's first PvP experience. He was fortunate enough to have a sparring match just before this incident began.

Closing his eyes, Rook ran his mind over how it had gone.



It happened at noon, on the same day that Rook *realized Marie's true identity*.

"This 'Superior Killer' that Ray often talks about... It's you, isn't it?" he whispered into Marie's ear right after they and Ray went separate ways.

"H-How did you know...?! I-I mean, no no no no! I'm not!" she burst out, the bewilderment in her voice all too apparent. Normally, she would have been able to hide it relatively well, but the surprise factor had made her blurt out the equivalent of "Yes, that's true," making Rook turn absolutely certain of his conjecture.

"O-Oh, come now, I-I'm definitely not the man known as the Superior Killer." Marie still tried to salvage it.

"Then allow me to present you with the circumstantial evidence I've gathered," said Rook.

“Eh?”

Thus, he began listing the reasons why he had come to this conclusion.

First: despite the Superior Killer’s age and gender being unknown, Marie often referred to him as a man. To Rook, it seemed like an attempt to give the entity a different image than her own.

Second: her behavior when talking to Ray about the Superior Killer’s thoughts tended to be different from usual.

Third: during the battle against Gardranda, Rook had been high above the ground, but still hadn’t been able to see a thing of what was happening within the dense miasma below. Yet Marie, who had also been outside it, had stated with absolute certainty that “The Superior Killer shot Gardranda’s left shoulder.”

Fourth: despite Marie having played for a year in real life, which was three years in here, she had a total level lower than newbies such as Rook and Ray, which led him to believe that she was concealing her true powers.

Fifth: there was a comic with a journalist/professional killer protagonist bearing a great deal of resemblance to Marie, and from what he’d read of it, even their mannerisms were highly alike.

That was when Marie raised her hands, looking absolutely defeated.

“Heh. Heh heh heh,” she chuckled in self-derision. “I give up. This is the first time someone has realized it before I revealed it myself.”

“You’re not exactly the best at concealing your identity, so I’m quite sure I’m not the only one who connected the dots,” said Rook.



“Ghh!” Marie’s face contorted with pain. She’d had confidence that she was doing a decent job of hiding what she really was, so Rook’s words did a good amount of emotional damage to her.

“Also, you use an avatar that has both the name and appearance of a character that’s both a journalist and a professional killer, so it’s completely obvious to anyone who has read the work,” added Rook.

“I’m fully aware of that, but it’s part of my identity,” she replied. Marie was basing her *Infinite Dendrogram* character on Marie from her manga, so it was a given for her to be a “Marie Adler” that acted as both a Journalist and a professional killer.

“Anyway, we know your identity now,” said Rook. “However, it doesn’t look like Ray and Nemesis are aware of it.”

“I’d probably feel like dying if they found out,” Marie said.

“You’re the one who gave them their only death penalty, right? Normally, I’d have a thing or two to say about that, but it doesn’t seem like you have any malice towards them right now, so I’m content with being silent about that.”

“Thank you.”

“That aside, can I make a little request?”

Marie said nothing as she made a mental note of the fact that the flow of the conversation made his question seem much like blackmail.

Rook might actually have a sadistic side to him, she thought.

“A request, you say?” she muttered. “A-Are you about to have me do something inappropriate and—”

“Nothing about that would remotely interest me.”

“Okay, kid... No need to cut me that deep... But what do you want of me, then?”

“I want you to have a mock battle against me.”

“A mock battle?” she asked.

“As I said before, I want to learn more about battles against people. And I figured that facing a hardened player killer such as yourself would be a good initiation.”

“Well, I don’t really mind, but why the interest in such battles?” Marie asked.

“That’s a secret,” he answered with a smile on his face.

His expression was so beautiful it was angelic, but once she considered the conversation so far, Marie found it a bit scary.

And so, the two made their way towards the sixth arena, located in the duel city’s sixth district. Though such places were normally bustling due to various events and betting matches, all the standard arenas were nearly barren today.

During low activity times such as these, it was possible to rent the arenas for barrier-protected mock battles. Unlike in normal matches, it

was also possible to make the barriers opaque, and Marie was truly thankful that she wouldn't have to fight while minding any potential observers.

"You're still below level 51, right, Rook?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm level 48," he answered.

"Then don't go near the barrier. You'll slip right through."

The barrier system allowed those of level 50 or below to pass through freely. Though those players benefited from the barrier's restorative qualities, it didn't wall them off inside. That was the reason why they couldn't partake in official arena battles.

"The preparations are done," said Marie as she set the block they'd rented into opaque mode.

With Babi at his side and Liz taking the form of his equipment, Rook summoned Marilyn and Audrey, making him fully ready for battle.

"We have plans for the evening, so let's not go above ten matches," she added. "Also, we might be sparring, but the gap in our power is still an issue, so I won't be using my special rewards."

To her mind, fighting while using special rewards like the Palsy Stingblade would cause Rook to lose the ten matches without giving him a chance to learn anything. Marie would use her Embryo, but she would avoid using its ultimate skill for exactly the same reason.

"Compared to many, my Embryo isn't particularly tricky, so I'm confident it's good for such practice," she said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes!" Rook answered with vigor.

"Then let's begin... Arc-en-Ciel." Marie summoned a revolver-shaped Embryo into her left hand, and held a blackened dagger in her right. The Embryo was Arc-en-Ciel, Type Legion, while the dagger was named Night Pain.

In response to Marie readying her weapons, Rook sent Marilyn and Audrey after her while Babi vigilantly eyed her for an opportunity to use a skill. Rook himself stood at the rear, protected by Liz, and used the Charm skill.

This was the battle style they'd used many times during the hunting they'd done after Liz had joined.

He was clearly planning to avoid using trickery and go all out on the very first match.

"Very well, then I won't do any tricks, either," said Marie as she swung her right hand, causing the break-action revolver to unload its chambers.

That action made Rook look puzzled. And not without reason, for she had emptied a gun that had yet to shoot a single bullet. However, even though it had the shape of a revolver, Arc-en-Ciel was more Embryo than gun, and what it shot weren't bullets.

“Black Homing, Red Burst, Blue Spread.” Marie’s words made three types of bullets — no, transparent containers filled with *paint* — enter the revolving chambers of her Embryo. Once again, she swung her hand again to give it the shape of a gun...

“Fire.”

...and pulled the trigger.

“GYAGYAGYAGYAGYAH!”

A moment later, several dozens of bullet creatures escaped Arc-en-Ciel’s muzzle. Bending their expected trajectory, all of them rushed to overwhelm Audrey. She flew in an attempt to evade them, but all the creatures followed after her.

There was little difference between Audrey’s and the creatures’ speeds...

“KIEEEEE?!”

...so, when she soon reached the top of the barrier, they all caught up with her and exploded upon impact.

Reduced to smithereens, Audrey’s corpse became particles of light and vanished.

“VRAAAAAGH!”

Right after that attack, Marilyn directed her horns at Marie and charged at her with all she had. In real life, this would be the equivalent of a 10 ton truck going at full speed...

“Too slow.”

...but to Marie — whose high AGI allowed her to break the sound barrier — Marilyn was barely even moving.

She dodged the horns right before the impact and unloaded the chambers yet again before wordlessly filling them with two types: Red Burst and Green Piercing. Then — slowly from her own perspective and immensely quickly from Marilyn’s — Marie put the muzzle against Marilyn’s shell and fired.

The bullet creature imbued with great piercing ability penetrated the tough material with little effort before exploding within Marilyn’s insides, quickly killing her and making her become particles of light.

Next up, Babi, Marie thought as she looked around, but she couldn’t see the succubus anywhere. A moment later, without even turning around, Marie swung Night Pain behind her.

“...Ah.”

That action caused the slashed space to release a gush of blood before becoming Babi, clearly on the verge of death.

Since she was able to use Drain Learning to absorb the skills of other monsters, Babi had received the Optic Camouflage skill from a Lesser Chameleon Basilisk, a creature inhabiting a forest area near Nex Plains. However, the hiding ability of that skill meant nothing to the Death Shadow — the apex of stealth.

Babi disappeared, leaving only Rook and Liz, who was still acting as his equipment.

With Arc-en-Ciel's bullet type still set to "penetrating and bursting," Marie fired at him.

Marie had intended to end the fight with that one shot, but unexpectedly, the bullet creature shifted its trajectory away from Rook and exploded after hitting the barrier.

Upon focusing on him, Marie realized that a part of his coat had become curved.

Rook had already noticed the bullets' penetrative abilities, and he'd chosen to turn them away instead of stopping them.

"I see," she said, astonished that the boy could notice that much from just one shot.

He also seems to know that I need to do the unloading motion to change modes, she realized. Rook's observational ability made chills go down Marie's spine.

"You won't protect against this, though," she said as she unloaded Arc-en-Ciel, loaded it with *only* Green Piercing, and fired once more.

The piercing bullet creatures that escaped the muzzle had far greater penetrative power than the ones mixed with bursting, allowing them to easily overcome the curved defense, pierce Rook, and kill him.

The primary feature of Marie Adler's Arc-en-Ciel was the creation and firing of bullet creatures. The qualities of the bullet creatures fired depended on the paint used. There were six types of paint, and the ones she'd used in this battle were black for homing, red for bursts, blue for spread, and green for piercing. Besides these, there were also white for paralysis and silver for flash.

Loading the six chambers with multiple paints gave the bullet creatures more abilities, but lowered the potency of each separate one. That made Arc-en-Ciel an Embryo that had to be used differently depending on the situation.

"And that's how it works." Marie ended her explanation.

"And how, exactly, is that 'not tricky'?" asked Rook. By the end of the first fight, he had been shot to death, Babi had vanished, and Marilyn and Audrey had exploded, but they were now just standing there — all alive and well, because even monsters were protected by the barriers.

"Hey now, I said 'compared to many,' and I stand by that," replied Marie. "As far as sixth form Embryos go, Arc-en-Ciel's very straightforward. By the time they start getting their ultimate skills, Embryos can become a bit... creative. For example, there's an Embryo that 'Turns people within a set boundary into toddlers.' Then there's one that 'Forcibly removes people's equipment and makes them

naked' and one that 'Turns people into creatures that they hate.' Mine's quite modest in comparison, no? By the way, the ones I just named all belong to Legendaria's Superiors."

Masters often described Legendaria as the "Land of Perverts," and their strongest certainly lived up to that reputation.

After that, Rook and Marie went on to have eight more matches, all of which were won by Marie.

The second and third battles were basically replays of the first. On the fourth, Rook's movements and actions had gotten better, so Marie started using the Shadow Clone Technique. Come the fifth battle, he was moving in a way to compensate for that, so she took to using Art of Hiding as well.

After that, it was a one-sided show of Marie combining her Embryo and job skills to defeat Rook.

By the latter half, Marie was putting more effort into their fights than she had during yesterday's battle against Elizabeth's would-be assassins, The Reaper's Pinky.

With Marie being a Superior Job wielding an Embryo in its sixth form, the difference in power between her and Rook was great.

The onmitsu grouping's Death Shadow job had high base resistances to debuffs, not to mention that she was equipped with items that increased them further still, rendering Rook's Charm useless and giving him next to no chance of victory. However, there was one thing that greatly astonished her — specifically, Babi.

Optic Camouflage wasn't the only skill she'd gained through Drain Learning. She also had skills such as Monstrous Strength, Petrifying Breath, and even increased resistances to fire and poison.

That certainly gave Rook a wide array of tactics, but alas, it wasn't enough for him to land even a single hit on Marie.

This makes me question if he's actually learning anything, she thought.

Since she'd experienced many PvP battles, this sparring certainly wasn't the first time she'd encountered and prevailed against tactics meant to kill her. The time when she'd gotten attacked by what was most likely the King of Destruction was no exception, for she'd survived that onslaught. That made it quite obvious that lukewarm tactics were ineffective against Marie.

Battles against someone more or less equal to yourself always teach you something new, she thought. *However, when fighting opponents significantly stronger than you, it's all or nothing — either you leave without any new knowledge or mature a lot. I wonder which one applies to Rook...*

Such worries went through Marie's head as they prepared for their tenth and final match.

In but an instant, Rook and his monsters alike were all evaporated.

With that, Marie won all ten of the battles. Besides the loss of her left arm in the last one, the result had been exactly what everyone would've expected. However, that single loss of limb made Marie feel like *she* was the one who'd lost.

At the start, Rook and his monsters had moved in a way not too different from before, but then he'd gone on to read her movements with terrifying precision and caught her off guard, giving him a chance to take her left arm. It was safe to say that, at that very moment, Rook had cornered Marie — a being far stronger than himself.

"Thank you for the practice matches!" Now that the fight was over, Rook lightly bowed his head, expressing sincere thanks.

"You're welcome," replied Marie. "You and your monsters aren't bad at all... In fact, considering your total playtime, you're nothing short of amazing. The way you use your skills and coordinate with your monsters is simply splendid. I was especially surprised by what you did last. Were you saving that tactic for the final battle, when you more or less understood the way I act?"

"Yes." Rook smiled. "I must say, you're very strong, Marie. Even nine battles weren't enough for me to become able to read your movements well enough. To be honest, I was going for your head with my last attack."

Oh, I see, she thought. He used the first nine battles to get a grasp of my movement patterns and then predict what I'd do in the last one. That aside, that bright smile of his certainly doesn't fit what he's saying. This boy might have the makings of a nonchalant brute. I'm kinda scared of what he'll become.

"Also, losing your arm didn't affect your movements at all," added Rook. "I expected that to create more openings."

"In high-level battles, losing limbs or organs is common, after all. It's something you get used to."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said. "Thank you very much for today."

"Did that help you much?"

"Yes! Very much!"

That makes losing an arm worth it, Marie thought. Still, he pushed me — a Superior Job — this far despite being a non-battle-oriented low-rank job. I'd already established that Ray, a newbie who's already killed two UBMs, was amazing, but Rook certainly isn't far behind him.

Having played for long, Marie knew enough Masters to be certain that these two were simply exceptional. And it wasn't because of their growth as players; they'd deviated from the norm right from the start.

Marie was half-excited and half-scared trying to imagine what the two would become.

“I wonder which one of them is stronger,” she muttered.

“Come again?” asked Rook.

“Oh, never mind. By the way, in the last battle, you used a skill you haven’t used before, right? Oh, and I don’t mean Mithril Strain.” Discarding the question from her previous mutter, Marie brought up something that had been on her mind ever since the battle ended.

Rook had read her movements to ambush her, then used Liz to attack. Marie could understand that much, but she didn’t see the process linking those two points.

She couldn’t see why he’d been able to wait for the ambush while surrounded by searing flames. The silver-colored humanoid figure might’ve been the result of Liz covering his body, but that shouldn’t have been enough to protect Rook from the heat. That feat required a considerable amount of fire resistance. Otherwise, he would’ve died from the flame before Marie even came close enough for the ambush. Due to that, Marie assumed that he’d used a skill that he didn’t use before then.

“That was Union Jack!” Babi shouted with pride before Rook could give his answer.

“Union Jack...?” Marie raised an eyebrow.

“Yes.” Rook nodded. “It’s a unique skill Babi acquired when she reached her third form.”

It seemed she’d gained that skill when she’d evolved during yesterday’s hunting, and they’d kept it hidden until the tenth battle.

A skill they preserved for the very end... With all the preparation they did for it, it’s obvious that it has a powerful effect, but... But Marie was unable to tell what kind of effect it had been. Most Embryo skills were based on the Embryo’s ability characteristics. However, unlike that of Ray’s Nemesis or Marie’s Arc-en-Ciel, Babi’s primary characteristic wasn’t too clear. Due to that, Marie couldn’t see the full picture behind Union Jack.

But, at the very least, she was able to tell that it was as terrifying as Rook’s superhuman talents.



“All right,” Rook said and opened his eyes, having ended the short recollection. At his side was Babi, looking right at him.

“Hey, Rook,” she said. “Were you remembering the practice battles from this afternoon?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Why’d you want to do them, anyway?”

“I guess you could say that I wanted to prepare.”

“For what?” she asked.

“This afternoon, Ray told us about his battle against a tian group called the ‘Gouz-Maise Gang,’ and, well, I think it must’ve been pretty hard for him. After all, Ray... he’s a gentle soul.”

“That’s true.” Babi nodded.

“However, he was faced with a situation where he absolutely had to overcome that mental hurdle and fight against *people*. That made me think that, sooner or later, I would have to do it, as well, so I figured that I needed to prepare a proper mindset for such battles. And, just as I expected, we’re about to fight *people*, meaning that the practice matches against Marie were absolutely worth it.”

“I don’t really get it, but if you’re gonna kill, then I will do it, too!” Babi declared.

While they were talking, the people around them were finishing up their preparations.

In the lobby, there was Ray, Rook, and a number of other newbies. However, the enemies outside were many, and they surpassed them in terms of both level and stats. Naturally, breaking through the enemies filling the plaza would be no small task.

“Okay,” muttered Rook as he remembered his battles against Marie. “The most important thing to keep in mind while fighting those stronger than you is to take advantage of their openings.”

Then he devised a certain plan and passed it over to his fellow newbies. With it, even they — no, *especially* they — would be able to take advantage of the enemies’ openings.

They all agreed to the plan and soon headed out of the arena.



Duel city Gideon’s central plaza

The central plaza expanding before the central arena was usually full of stalls, street performers, and hustle and bustle in general, making it one of the city’s most popular attractions. Yet, despite it being the night of one of Gideon’s greatest events, the stalls were all barren and the performers were absent.

Franklin’s game had thrown the city into a state of absolute chaos. Naturally, the common folk had scattered from the plaza like flies, as far away from the core of the chaos, the central arena, as possible. But a certain group was there to replace them.

It was a gathering of about forty Masters and their tamed monsters or slaves. They were all prepared for battle, standing alert about anything that could leave through the entrance of the arena, ready to block the paths of anybody who tried.

The group certainly wasn’t there to stop any of the monsters released in the arena from escaping to town. In fact, they were there

to eliminate any Masters trying to curb the chaos enveloping Gideon.

The group were Franklin's pawns: the ones he'd referred to as "the betrayers" when having a phone talk with his sponsor, prime minister Vigoma. Just as their name said, they were the kingdom's Masters who wished to defect to the imperium.

Their reason was simple: profit. When wars happened and ended, there was a world of difference between the advantages gained by the victors and those gained by the losers.

Thus, due to the situation in the kingdom becoming worse, many Masters were switching to other countries. Among those were ones who wished to switch after doing something to improve their standing with Dryfe, both to avoid becoming a loser and to curry favor with the winning side.

The people in the plaza were exactly that — a group of Masters from the kingdom that Franklin had enticed with good conditions if they switched to Dryfe. He was having them participate in his plan as player killers.

"Heh heh. Looks like they realized that low level kiddies can get out," said a leather-clad traitor as he watched what was going on in the arena's lobby.

"Oh? And here I was beginning to think that we wouldn't get to do anything," replied a woman wearing priestly clothing.

"HYAHAAH! Time to shoot some fish in a barrel!" shouted a man with his hair in a pure-red mohawk and sunglasses over his eyes. Though the sunglasses and hair didn't seem to fit it, the rest of his apparel made it clear that he was actually a mage of some sort.

The three with the highest levels among those that'd gathered in the central plaza.

Strong Swordsman, Ryzac.

Bishop, Myanna.

Pyromancer, Mohawk Red.

While most of the betrayers were somewhere around level 100, these three were over level 300. Also, perhaps due to them knowing each other for so long, they were acting like the leaders of the entire group.

However, they certainly weren't the strongest betrayers in the kingdom.

There were two types of treacherous Masters. The first type had considerable power, while the second type wanted to switch because they were relatively weak. The former were tasked with handling the high-rank players that could potentially escape the arena, while the latter, weaker ones were positioned in the plaza to take care of the newbies.

The very fact that these three were here meant that Franklin

didn't consider them to be particularly strong.

"Well, time to do our job," said Ryzac.

Though they certainly weren't pleased with his assessment, they still considered themselves lucky. After all, the task they've been given was extremely easy. Logic itself dictated that low-rank jobs were weaker than high-rank jobs and that low-rank Embryos were weaker than high-rank ones. Everyone knew that a job where people had to face those weaker than themselves was simple.

"HYAHAAH! Here they come!" guffawed Mohawk Red.

The betrayers could see that the newbies in the lobby were done with their preparations.

There's just over twenty of them... Yeah, we've won, Ryzac thought to himself and grinned.

They were above the newbies in both individual power and numbers, making failure absolutely unthinkable.

"Red, greet them with a little AOE spell," said Ryzac.

"HYAHAAH! Time to take out the trash!" replied Mohawk Red as he prepared an offensive spell, which was ready in just twenty seconds. It needn't be said that it had power no low-rank job could withstand.

They've probably got some buffs from the higher-rank players stuck in there, but that's never going to be enough to bring a low-rank to a high-rank's level, Ryzac thought confidently. Due to that, what was about to begin was going to be less of a battle and more of a one-sided extermination. Ryzac was absolutely certain of that.

And then he was proven wrong.

"What?" he raised an eyebrow. He'd expected the newbies to charge at them at full force. Instead, a mere one of those inside stuck his arm out through the barrier...

"Hellish Miasma, full power."

...and released an intense flow of dark purple smoke.

While the barrier prevented any of it from going into the arena, it spread throughout the entire central plaza, making about a fourth of the traitors lose their postures.

"Huh? Wh-What...?" Ryzac looked at his status summary and noticed that he had a debuff called "Intoxication."

He then looked at the status displays of his party and saw the same Intoxication debuff, along with two others: Poison and Weakness.

"G-Gas that gives *three* debuffs?!" Ryzac shouted in a panic. Luckily for him, he had accessories that protected him against Poison and Weakness, but that wasn't the main thing to consider in this situation. "Why is a low-rank newbie able to use an item like this?!"

His confusion was perfectly justified. After all, equipment had

level limits. Skills that were able to apply three debuffs at once were the realm of high-rank jobs focusing on curses, so low-rank people should never be able to equip items that could do the equivalent. Even Ryzac and his buddies would have trouble getting and using such gear.

However, there was an exception.

When the equipment in question was an MVP special reward, it had properties that took after the UBM it was based on. Furthermore, MVPs could wear and use their special rewards regardless of level.

But of course, normally, low level players never became MVPs.

“Gheeh...”

“Hey! Drink your Elixirs!”

“Huh? B-But that’s such a waste...”

“You retard! If we fight in this state, even low-ranks could give us death penalties!”

The betrayers had lost their pace. With them being just a ragtag group of willing player killers, it wasn’t exactly reasonable to expect much coordination between them, but the unexpected turn of events made it even worse.

While most opted to drink Elixirs themselves, many of those with monsters and slaves under their command were too stingy to share and instead returned them back to the Jewel. Naturally, that reduced their numbers.

“Tch...!” Ryzac clicked his tongue in frustration.

Having more *Infinite Dendrogram* experience, the three with the highest levels didn’t hesitate to swig the Elixirs and remove the debuffs ailing them.

They sure got us with this one, he thought. I’m guessing those newbies got Elixirs from the high-rank players in there. They’re planning to take advantage of the buffs they got and take care of us while we’re suffering from the debuffs!

But Ryzac had no intention of letting that happen. Turning to Mohawk Red, he saw a giant sphere of fire that looked ready to be released hanging above the mage’s head.

All right! This will crush them the moment they leave! Ryzac thought as he felt something move within the smokescreen — from the direction of the arena’s entrance.

He was quick to realize that many people were leaving the barrier.

Ryzac instantly braced to face the newbies before realizing that something beyond his expectations was there, as well.

Wait... There’s something huge!

And so, breaking through the dark purple smokescreen came a dragon reminiscent of a heavy tank. A Tri-Horn Demi-Dragon, to be

precise.

It was a Demi-Dragon class monster that had little in the way of unique skills, but came equipped with particularly high stats. Ryzac had defeated these before, but what mattered here wasn't that, but the question of...

"Why does a low-rank have one of these?!"

Such a creature's presence here was thoroughly unexpected.

As Ryzac considered that a high-rank might've lent it to some newbie...

"MHOOOOOO!"

...the Tri-Horn Demi-Dragon, buffed and strengthened by the Masters inside, charged with all the force it could muster. In its way were the betrayer Masters who'd yet to cure themselves of their debuffs.

"Red!" shouted Ryzac.

"Crimson Sph—" Following his buddy's order, Mohawk Red prepared to launch the completed Crimson Sphere, the ultimate Pyromancer spell, towards the Demi-Dragon. However...

"Silence." That clear voice came from *the top of the Demi-Dragon*, and was followed by the sound of someone snapping their fingers.

Once it resounded, Mohawk Red's Crimson Sphere, which had been complete just a moment ago and had been meant to be the Demi-Dragon's demise, vanished like mist in the wind. Then, with little resistance, the Demi-Dragon trampled the Masters who were too weak to retaliate due to the Intoxication and Weakness debuffs.

"Red! What the hell?!" roared Ryzac.

"That wasn't me! Some guy canceled my magic just now...!"

After crushing the weakened Masters, the Demi-Dragon continued to ravage their ranks. That wasn't all, either — a Demi-Dragon-class avian had appeared and joined the Tri-Horn in wreaking havoc. As the chaos and confusion among the betrayers grew, the newbies finally broke through the smokescreen and attacked them.

I misjudged their power and let them have the initiative, but we're still stronger, and there are more of us! Ryzac thought, and he thought right.

Though they were equipped with unexpected items and had monsters common to relevant high-rank jobs, the difference in total power was far too obvious. When compared, the betrayers had far more than just double or triple the power. With a difference this great, there was little doubt that they would emerge victorious, and Ryzac was absolutely correct to think so.

"The low-rank Masters are here!"

"Gank 'em!"

A woman and a man among the betrayers brandished their weapons in preparation to attack the approaching newbies...

“Eh?”

“Ah?”

...but instead of attacking them, they attacked each other's vital spots.

The man's ax dug into the woman's shoulder, while her arrow pierced his throat.

And so, completely clueless as to what'd happened, they fell to their knees and were defeated by the newbies moments after.

“What the hell's... Huh?!” Ryzac found the answer to his question before he could even finish speaking.

His party's status display showed that they had the “Charm” debuff.

Charmed beings helped their enemies and killed their allies, making it one of the worst mental status effects in existence. And, due to it being mental, rather than disease-based, not even Elixirs could help protect against it.

The two who'd practically killed each other and Ryzac's party members weren't the only ones who were Charmed. Other Masters, their monsters, slaves... The Charm gradually continued to spread until more than half of the betrayers were fighting for the opposing side.

Indeed, it was hard to battle high-ranks while being low-rank. Emerging victorious while being weaker in both quality and quantity was truly difficult. So one simply had to borrow some forces.

From where? Why, from the opposing side, of course.

“Charm... CHARM?! There's no way that's possible!” Ryzac shouted.

His reaction was only natural. He and his people had high-rank jobs and were equipped with decent items. Among those, of course, were accessories that negated the effects of debuffs. For instance, despite not downing an Elixir, Ryzac was unaffected by Poison and Weakness.

However, the number of status effects in *Infinite Dendrogram* was vast, and it was nigh impossible to be prepared for all of them.

While making equipment selections in preparation for this battle, one of the status effects that had been disregarded first was Charm. After all, skills that applied Charm could only be learned by a handful of non-battle-oriented jobs, such as Pimp or Harlot.

High-ranks would sometimes take the Pimp job to get this skill or Female Monster Strengthening for its synergy with Tamer's Monster Strengthening. However, none of the betrayers had expected to encounter a player that had taken it before getting to total level 50 — as one of their first jobs.

“Huuhh?! The Charm's spreading too fast! There's more than

one?!”

“Hell if I know!”

Another unexpected thing was the presence of an Embryo that could apply Charm, just like a Pimp.

In the natural world, monsters that used Charm were powerful, difficult to tame, and cost a lot, making it unlikely for low-rank jobs to have them. However, none of that applied to a Master with a succubus for an Embryo.

Making her way through the openings in the chaos of battle, she was Charming the men, one after another.

“MYANNAAA! Use a spell already! Remove the Charm, damn it!” Ryzac called out to Myanna, his high-level Bishop friend. He believed that her healing magic skills had the potential to remove all the Charm on their side.

However, no one answered to his call.

“Hey, what the hell?! You dead or something?! Myanna!” he called out once more and again got no response.

Since the three were acting as leaders of separate parties of lower-level Masters, Ryzac was unable to find out what became of Myanna. However, the fact that she hadn’t responded was enough for him to conclude that she’d died in the chaos.

Why...? Why?! We were supposed to win this, damn it!

Their having gone from having an absolute advantage to being even — no, disadvantaged! — troubled Ryzac to no end. Still, his experience as a player allowed him to easily cut down one of the newbie Masters charging towards him.

Yeah. We’re not done yet! he thought. *There’s still me and Red!*

Regaining his composure, Ryzac continued swinging his blade.

Mohawk Red completed preparing another Crimson Sphere.

“HYAHAAH! YOU’RE GONNA GET IT THIS TIME! Crimson Sphere!” he shouted, and there was no one to stop him this time.

Mohawk Red’s most powerful spell went straight towards a single Master — the one wearing the bracers that covered the plaza in miasma. Red aimed to burn him down and relish the payback factor in the process.

The newbie was caught unawares, and the Crimson Sphere landed right on him.

“HYAHAAH! EAT IT!”

The Master with the bracers got engulfed in flames and became particles of light before he could even leave any ash...

...or so Red thought, but then the Master jumped out of the flames and charged towards him at full speed.

“Hyah?” Red released a weird sound, completely dumbfounded.

Then, right after a broken Dragonscale Ward fell out of the newbie

Master's pocket...

“Vengeance is Mine!”

...he hit Mohawk Red — a Master above level 250 — and instantly made him vanish.

“R-REEEEEEED!” shouted Ryzac, and not without reason, for what he'd seen was something that simply couldn't happen. Like himself, Mohawk Red was a high-level Master, especially when compared to most in the plaza, and yet he'd gotten one-shotted by a far weaker newbie.

“Wh-Why is this happening?!” Ryzac shouted.

He could still hold and swing his sword, but his mind was in a state of panic, causing him to mutter his thoughts.

“We were all high-ranks here... Our stats and Embryo forms were higher than theirs... So why... Why are we being overwhelmed... It doesn't make sense...”

By that point, the forces on his side had been cut down by more than half. About 40% of those still alive were Charmed. And with them having lost Mohawk Red and Myanna — the strongest among them — it was safe to say that the betrayers were defeated.

“...N-Not yet! *I* still haven't lost!” Ryzac screamed.

After forcefully encouraging himself, the high-level Strong Swordsman cut down the enemies before him.

I tried to switch to Dryfe so that I could win, he thought. Losing here is the opposite of what I want.

Vehemently, desperately, he defeated any enemies he crossed paths with. He could no longer tell whether they were newbies or ex-allies that had gotten Charmed — he fought any and all people that came to him as enemies.

“Hh...!” That was when he came across someone particularly powerful. The person wore full body armor of a silver color — no, the results of his Reveal skill said that it was a monster called “Mithril Arms Slime.”

He's wearing a liquid metal-type slime as armor? Looks kinda tough... however...! Ryzac thought as he put his hand against his sword, a Type Arms Embryo.

“All-Slashing Blade — Durandal!” he roared, declaring that he was using his high-rank Embryo's ultimate skill.

Durandal's ultimate skill was different from Hraesvelgr and Poseidon, which were high-rank, as well. While those were the type of skills to unleash a single, powerful attack, Durandal's ultimate skill was enhancement.

For a minute after activation, Durandal became able to cut *anything*. No matter how tough the Mithril Arms Slime was, when imbued with this power, Ryzac's blade could easily cut through it and

kill the Master within.

“Let’s do this!” he roared and charged, to which the Mithril Arms Slime responded with a swing from its blade-like tentacles.

Though its speed matched — or surpassed — that of a high-rank vanguard, it wasn’t difficult for Ryzac to see it, as he had become stronger and faster due to the side-effects of his ultimate skill. He swung Durandal twice and — with great ease — cut the tentacles off before charging close enough to cut his enemy. Then Ryzac unleashed a horizontal slash meant to split his opponent at the abdomen.

“You’re done.”

Due to Durandal’s immense sharpness, he didn’t feel any resistance. However, it was clear that it easily broke through the Mithril Arms Slime’s defense and split the person inside in half. The upper and lower half fell to the ground with half of the Slime accompanying them each. Despite that, the upper half of the Mithril Arms Slime moved to stop the blood flowing from the cut.

That’s useless. He’s as good as dead— Huh...? In order to stop the blood, the Slime focused most of its volume on the wound, causing other parts to become uncovered.

Those parts included the Master’s face.

Upon seeing it, Ryzac lost his words, for it was *his friend, the Bishop, Myanna*.

The Mithril Arms Slime had bound her in a way that prevented all movement and filled her mouth with enough of itself to gag her.

The realization that he’d split his own friend in half made Ryzac’s mind go blank.

Taking advantage of his sorry state, the Mithril Arms Slime hastily turned half of itself into a spear and *pierced him from his nether region to the top of his head*.

“Gh?” Naturally, the damage was critical, making his HP drop to 0. Though his consciousness was still somewhat alive during the resurrection period, the destruction to his vitals was great, making it obvious that he wouldn’t last much longer.

“Make them panic and they show their openings. Aim for a critical hit and they die instantly.” Before getting the death penalty, Ryzac saw Myanna get freed from the Mithril Arms Slime’s bindings and slowly turn into particles of light as the Slime, with its job done, crawled towards some boy.

As beautiful as a winter fairy, he talked to the Mithril Arms Slime in the same clear voice Ryzac had heard at the beginning of the battle.

“Don’t miss an opening, and you can kill those stronger than you,” he said. “It’s just like we learned in the practice matches. Except this time, we were successful, Liz.”

Though no doubt beautiful, Ryzac found the smile on the boy’s

face to be scary beyond words.

Aahh... Damn it... he thought as he vanished. If I'd known we had newbies like this... I wouldn't have done this shit...

Overwhelmed with regret, Ryzac got the death penalty.



Soon after they'd lost their leaders and three strongest, the rest of the traitors gathered in the central plaza were quickly annihilated.

Then, having passed that hurdle, the newbies spread out to help fight the monsters ravaging the city or to search for Franklin.

Though this fight was merely the beginning for them, it should've been something they couldn't win. While the betrayers had been presented with many unexpected things, in the end, it could all be boiled down to the existence of a mere two extraordinary entities — Ray and Rook.

Chapter Three: The Movement on the Board

Paladin, Ray Starling

“That’s one barrier cleared,” I said.

“It appears so,” agreed Nemesis.

We’d escaped the central arena and fought the player killers that’d awaited us at the plaza.

Thanks to Rook’s plan, we’d been able to beat them with few casualties, despite them being far stronger and more numerous than us.

When I’d needed to use Hellish Miasma, I’d been worried about the prospect of involving innocents who still happened to be in the plaza, but a high-rank Master with a radar-like Embryo had shown me that it was all good in that regard.

After that, thanks to Rook using his Touch of the Silencer to cancel an enemy’s spell, and then him and Babi both using their Charm skills like they had in the battle against the goblin horde, we’d gotten an upper hand against the player killers.

I’d thought that the caster’s surprise attack was gonna kill me, but I’d survived thanks to the Dragonscale Ward Shu had given me before we left the arena. The fact that I hadn’t seen it coming had left me without a chance to use Counter Absorption, but that skill’s stock was extremely scarce right now, anyway. Only one use had been restored since my battle against Gouz-Maise yesterday, so having saved it could work out in my favor.

This battle and my encounter with Xunyu before The Clash of the Superiors had made me aware that the skill wasn’t without its flaws. It was ineffective in situations where I didn’t see the attack coming or just couldn’t use it fast enough. Sooner or later, I would have to find a way to make up for these flaws.

Skill problems aside, we’d defeated the player killers in the arena’s plaza.

After the battle, we newbies split up in all directions. I chose to go west, and Rook and a few others accompanied me.

Riding Silver, I led our little group forward. I’d avoided using my mount in the battle at the plaza because the brawl had been too melee-oriented, and I was satisfied with my decision, since the spell that had hit me might’ve actually melted him.

Following behind me, Rook and Babi were riding Marilyn, and furthest at the back, there were three girl Masters. All of them were staring at Rook, making it pretty certain that his being the ultra pretty-boy was the reason why they had come with us. Not that I could fault them for that, really.

“So, Ray,” Rook spoke up. “Sorry for the belated question, but why are we heading west?”

“Well...” Indeed, I was the one who’d decided to go west, and he was right to assume that I’d had a reason. I’d chosen to go there because of the words gnawing at my mind.

It’s west.

Hugo had told me this just before we’d separated. He was a Master from the Dryfe Imperium and a member of the clan known as “Triangle of Wisdom,” which he’d described as the biggest clan in Dryfe, meaning that it was the one owned by the top of Dryfe’s clan rankings: Franklin.

Back then, Hugo had tried to play it off like it was nothing, but I felt that...

“*Something’s* up in the west,” I said.

Unless he’d predicted that I would think like this and lied in order to mislead me, we should find something there. Since I didn’t think that Hugo was the type to lie like that, I was going straight to the west.

Seemingly understanding, Rook nodded and began riding parallel to me.

Thus, we made our way towards the western gate.

If Hugo’s words were truthful and there was indeed something to be found there, I was wholly confident that he himself would stand in our way.



100 metels above the duel city, on the Night Lounge

Night Lounge — the flying, self-concealing monster — was melting into the dead of night as it flew straight towards the west. Sitting on its back, Franklin was doing something on a device highly reminiscent of tablets from the 2010s.

“The traitors at the central plaza are all dead,” he muttered. “This isn’t unexpected, but it certainly happened faster than I thought it would.”

“What are you looking at?” asked Elizabeth.

“Here you go,” Franklin said as he reached into his inventory and presented her with a device just like the one in his hands.

She looked down on it and saw a map of Gideon. It was covered in bright markers that clearly surpassed quadruple digits, and most of

them were concentrated in the central arena.

“These lights... They’re Masters, aren’t they?” she asked.

Though the markers were many, they were nowhere near the total population of Gideon, making her assume that they represented the Masters in the area.

“Indeed they are.” Franklin nodded. “Clearly, you’re not a silly goose. I like people who aren’t silly geese. You’re easy to talk to.”

“I do not appreciate being liked by my father’s murderer,” Elizabeth replied.

“HA HA HA! Thought as much! That’s the obvious sentiment, after all! GAH HA!” he laughed heartily, evidently finding it more funny than he had any right to.

Naturally, the princess found his reaction unpleasant, but more than that, she was curious about why it seemed so exaggerated.

“I happen to know someone who doesn’t seem to understand that,” Franklin continued. “Then again, we’re talking about a person that took the imperator’s throne by killing all the older royalty. Can’t really expect such a character to be reasonable.”

“I cannot make sense of anything you’re saying,” Elizabeth informed him.

“That’s because there’s a huge difference in the amount of information you and I have. Anyway, back to the subject at hand... Yes, you’re holding a location map of all the Masters in Gideon. It’s real-time, too.”

Sure enough, the many markers on the map were moving.

The map was the result of a device created by The Triangle of Wisdom that was picking up the data signaled by a network of Franklin-made spycam monsters, which he’d scattered all across the city over several days before the plan.

Equipping the monsters with great hiding ability and Master differentiation had come at the cost of limiting the information they provided to show locations and nothing more — they didn’t even give the names of the Masters. However, that was all that Franklin needed. He only wished to know where the Masters were, and to be able to tell friend from foe.

“May I ask something?” spoke up Elizabeth.

“You may,” Franklin replied in a smug manner.

“These lights are either red or blue. Are they...?”

“Yes. We are red, while blue are the kingdom’s Masters. I know that red is often the ‘enemy’ color, but I happen to like it, you see.”

The markers were either blue or red, and the latter ones represented the Masters that Franklin had registered before this incident began. Though the blue markers vastly outnumbered the red, most of them were concentrated in the central arena. The blue and red

in the rest of the city were about equal in number, but there was something to keep in mind...

“Not even half of the blue Masters outside the arena can fight properly,” said Franklin. “Most of them are either non-battle jobs who weren’t interested in the duel or third-rates who couldn’t get a hold of a ticket for it.”

Due to that, the blue markers tended to disappear soon after they encountered red ones.

The traitors besides the ones at the central plaza had been given the same devices as the ones held by Franklin and Elizabeth, which allowed them to seek out the blue markers, the kingdom’s Masters, and kill them. The only real exception was when the outpouring of blue markers from the central arena had quickly made the red markers in the central plaza disappear.

Still, that wasn’t unexpected, for the traitors positioned there had been among the weakest. The traitors tasked with doing a search-and-destroy in the city were significantly stronger, so they had little trouble taking care of non-battle jobs and third-rates.

“Though it’s not like there *aren’t* any tough cookies among those who didn’t go see the event,” Franklin commented.

A few red markers surrounding a certain blue one were disappearing.

He muttered, “I prepared this map to make it easier for me to find these ‘exceptions.’”

The device he was holding vibrated as a voice came out of it. “H-Help, Franklin! It’s the sixth in the duel rankings! The ‘Kamen Rider’ is...”

“RIIISSEEEERRRRR KIIIIICK!” That voice was followed by the sound of a fierce explosion, after which, there was nothing but noise.

Franklin pressed something, ending the connection. “The sixth, huh? Guess it’s safe to expect more like him. Well, at least ‘they’ will have something to do,” he grinned as he spoke to the device. “Club. Move to C3.”

Elizabeth didn’t know what he meant by that.

However, a short while later, she heard a loud impact coming from somewhere in the city. Looking back at the map, she noticed that the blue marker that’d seemingly defeated Franklin’s people had disappeared. In its place, there was red club-like marker.

“Club?” she asked. That was one of the playing card suits. Playing cards were a popular diversion even in *Infinite Dendrogram*, and casino games such as poker and blackjack were well-known pastimes. That was why Elizabeth instantly knew that she was looking at the symbol for the club suit.

“Oh, that’s a special marker,” Franklin explained. “The other reds

were hired only recently, while these markers were my people from the start.”

She fell silent. Looking down, she noticed that there were a total of three such markers.

The first was a club. It moved around here and there, causing any nearby blue markers — including the “exceptions” that could kill red markers — to vanish.

The second was a heart. It was merely standing still near Gideon’s western gate. However, any blue markers that came close to it were vanishing without exception.

The third was a diamond. It was slowly making its way towards the west, and a short evaluation of the surroundings and its position on the map made it obvious that it was Franklin.

Elizabeth was now aware that Gideon had three entities far more dreadful than any monster or traitor.

Club, heart and diamond, she thought, making a certain question come to mind. *Where is the spade...?*

The spade suit carried the meaning of “sword” or “death,” making it the most ominous of the four, and for reasons unknown, it was nowhere on the map.

“Are you curious about the spade?” asked Franklin, as if he’d just read her mind. “It won’t show on this map. It’s for Plan D, anyway, so don’t expect it to be used.”

“Plan D?” she repeated.

“Yes. That’s what you’d call it if the current one is ‘Plan A.’ And I have no intention to fail with this one.” Franklin made Night Lounge change direction a bit.

Wondering why he’d done that, Elizabeth looked down on the map and saw two blue markers near the diamond, making it clear that it was to avoid them.

“So this map is also meant to prevent you from meeting Masters?” she asked.

“Why, yes,” he answered. “I happen to be a weakling, so I’d like to avoid having to fight by myself.”

Despite saying that, Franklin seemed quite confident that no one below could see through Night Lounge’s concealment ability.

“Though I avoid unnecessary battles, if I were to fight, those who could break through all the monsters at my disposal and land a finishing blow on me would only be my fellow Superiors,” he chuckled as he looked down on the map again.

Gideon was still in chaos as the diamond marker representing him casually moved over an empty area.

All was good.

At least, until a blue marker appeared right behind the diamond.

Surprised, Franklin tried to turn around, but before he could even move his neck, he felt his carotid artery get severed. That attack was followed by a barrage of bullet creatures, which sank into his body and exploded, causing great damage.

It didn't end there, for the attack extended to the Night Lounge, causing its back to burst in places too many to count. Unable to bear it, the monster began losing altitude and descended to the city beneath.

Surrounded by bewildering chaos, Franklin looked around and saw an entity shrouded in a black mist scoop up Elizabeth — who'd fainted due to shock caused by the explosions — and jump down. The misty being wasn't unknown to him.

...Oh, yeah, he thought. Can't believe I forgot about the Master who killed a Superior despite not being one.

Upon remembering the player killer known as the "Superior Killer," Franklin held on for dear life as his Night Lounge crashed into the streets of Gideon.



Duel city Gideon, ninth district

When Franklin kidnapped Elizabeth and disappeared from the arena, Marie instantly left her box seat. Her motive was simple — to chase after Franklin and rescue Elizabeth.

Being the Death Shadow, an AGI-focused Superior Job, allowed her to move at supersonic speeds, so she quickly made her way through the arena's hallways and got to the exit. However, when she tried to go outside, she got rejected by the barrier.

Marie didn't find its existence all that surprising. The fact that Franklin could trap Figaro and Xunyu in the barrier on the stage made it entirely possible that he could seal the arena, as well.

She was also quick to conclude that he'd done this in order to make the kingdom's Masters appear powerless. Elizabeth's kidnapping, too, had clearly been meant to increase the strength of that sentiment.

Marie couldn't let herself waste a moment's worth of time, so she *instantly escaped the barrier*.

She was capable of doing that because she was the Death Shadow — a Superior Job. She could do that for the same reason Xunyu's Zhenhuo Zhendeng Baolongba had broken the upper part of the barrier surrounding the Clash of the Superiors battle. That had been the ultimate skill of the Master Jiangshi — a Superior Job.

Due to that, Marie had assumed that Superior Job ultimate skills could surpass arena barriers. With that in mind, she'd used Death Shadow's ultimate skill.

Though it was a job from the stealth-oriented onmitsu grouping

and thus didn't have much in the ways of firepower, it was more or less suitable for the situation she was in. And so, at the cost of half of her SP, Marie escaped the barrier.

Once out in the streets, she used the Conceal and Conceal Perception skills to search for Franklin.

Eventually, Marie noticed the strange, stingray-like creature of the Night Lounge flying through the sky. She jumped up from the top of a building and used her own clones as stepping stones to reach and assault the creature.

Just as she'd expected, Franklin was riding it, so she hastily sliced his neck and put him in a critical state using explosive, piercing bullets from her Arc-en-Ciel. She followed it up with explosive attacks on the stingray-like creature before taking Elizabeth and jumping off.

And thus, Marie was now running through Gideon's streets with the second princess on her back.



A soft shaking caused Elizabeth to wake up.

She found the sensation to be familiar, for she'd felt it just yesterday. It was the feeling of being carried on someone's back, and both the softness and the scent accompanying this sensation were the same as those from back then.

"Ma...rie...?" Elizabeth asked in slight a stupor.

"Yes," said the one holding her. "It's me, Ellie."

"I'm happy to have met you again... But why are you...?"

"For now, let's just get somewhere safe. We'll talk later!" Marie said as she ran.

Though Elizabeth couldn't tell due to the shaking being so mild, Marie's speed was easily surpassing 100 kilometers per hour. Marie was the Death Shadow, an onmitsu grouping Superior Job, and she had a build focused on AGI and conceal skills. That made it easy for her to run with such speed even while being considerate of someone she was carrying.

The safe place Marie had in mind was the central arena. There were many high-rank Masters there. Not to mention that no one above level 50 could enter.

Sure, when Marie'd used the Death Shadow's ultimate skill to leave it, there had still been some monsters there, but considering all the players inside, it was safe to assume that they'd already been taken care of. Not to mention that one person in particular would be able to do it with ridiculous ease.

"Marie, if we're running, use this," Elizabeth said as she presented her with the device she still had in her hands.

"This is... Well, this will be useful," said Marie as she took the

map and began moving while avoiding the red markers.

Just like when she'd attacked the Night Lounge, Marie was still using several conceal-type skills which prevented her from appearing on the map. Nevertheless, it was easy for her to see where she was by comparing the map and the streets around her.

"By the way, do you know the meaning of these card suit markers?" she asked.

"Yes. Diamond is Franklin, while heart and club are his confidants," answered the princess.

"I see..." said Marie while trying to contain the urge to click her tongue. "So he's still alive."

Based on what her Reveal skill told her, Franklin's max HP was almost ten times lower than all the damage she'd done to him, but despite the lack of warding accessories on him, the diamond marker was still there, meaning that he'd survived those fatal wounds.

Looks like he's also using Life Link, not just Castling, she thought. That means that I won't be able to kill him until I take care of the monsters within his capacity.

Life Link allowed the users to share HP with the monsters they had. Though it was certainly a useful skill that could potentially keep the users and their forces alive right until the very end, it also had many disadvantages.

The primary one was the fact that it could only work with monsters within the minion capacity and would have no effect if the monsters were placed in a party slot. However, the biggest one was the necessity of forming a strong bond with the monster in question, making it prioritize its owner over itself.

Creating a relationship in which the monster thought more of its master than itself was usually a process that took a lot of time and effort. Due to that, people who used Life Link were few.

The skill has some difficult conditions, but it seems like they mean nothing to Franklin, thought Marie.

Being a monster creator, Franklin could make monsters that had endless loyalty to him right from the very start, making it easy for him to have procured some Life Link-based HP tanks. That wasn't all. If he also discarded the monsters' combat ability and focused entirely on their HP, even minion capacity wouldn't be much of a problem.

Anyway, him being alive is really bad, thought Marie. Franklin was a Superior, meaning that it was unlikely he would fall for the same tricks again.

She'd also made herself into his target, making it safe to expect him to come at her with unpredictable means. As one who'd already fought and felled a Superior, Marie knew that better than most.

I have to bring Ellie to the central arena as soon as possible...! she

thought. All the Masters trapped there made the arena the safest place in the entire city.

However, Marie had an even bigger reason for going there.

The barrier trapped most of the players there... including him. If he's who I think he is, then not even Franklin can win against him.

With that certain person in mind, Marie made her way towards the central arena.

She almost crashed into some monsters along the way, but she quickly blew them away with critical hits from homing, explosive bullets.

Soon enough, the central arena was in sight.

"All right!" said Marie. "We're at the home stretch, Ellie!"

"Yes, Ma—"

"I'll be taking the princess back, thank you very much."

Before Elizabeth could finish her sentence, a voice came from the device, and a moment later, Marie felt Elizabeth's weight and breathing completely vanish.

Marie turned around and saw a songbird-like monster just like the one she saw back at the arena. Elizabeth was nowhere in sight.

Upon realizing what'd happened, Marie clicked her tongue in frustration and cut down the songbird. "I was quite confident we were far outside of Castling's effective range..." she said.

"You were," replied Franklin. "But it just so happens that I have observational monsters all over the city. I caught up to you by Castling between them. You know, like a bucket brigade."

Slightly disturbed that he was capable of that, Marie suppressed the urge to question him about the cooldowns and MP usage involved, since she was aware that Franklin was among the greatest monster creators, both Master and tian alike. Asking him about such things was meaningless.

"But man, you sure did me in back there, Superior Killer," Franklin continued. "I actually thought I was gonna die."

Though Marie'd sliced his neck not too long ago, the wound was already gone as if it had never been there, letting him speak with a clear tone. That fact greatly irritated Marie.

"Well, I was aiming for at least a death penalty," she said.

"At least a death penalty? Whoa, that's scary," Franklin replied.

"I'm coming to kill you again," she growled. "And take Ellie back."

"A ha ha ha, truly scary." Though Franklin's tone had a hint of actual fear in it, his grin was still wide. "Hey, I'm actually scared here... Mind doing something about her, club?"

At that moment, Marie's Danger Perception skill flared up, warning her about a great threat. Using her immense agility, she

moved at supersonic speeds to distance herself from where she was standing.

She glanced back and saw the space there begin to crumble.

The paving, buildings, and even plants — everything that had shape was shattering, falling apart and being reduced to dust.

“I’ll leave you to my boy here,” said Franklin. “After all, I had him come so he could take care of ‘exceptions’ like yourself.”

Those words were his last before the device in her hands self-destructed. It was probably a function he’d installed in case it slipped into a third party’s hands, but Marie wasn’t in a position to care much about that.

What had once been a part of Gideon’s streets had become akin to a desert, and beyond this scenery, there was a mysterious-looking group of four.

The first of them was a man in a bird-like hat, swinging a conductor’s baton.

The second was a centaur playing a violin.

The third was a cat sith blowing into a flute.

And the last one was a kobold hitting a drum.

Marie quickly realized that she’d seen such a group before, and after a quick jog through her memory, she remembered that they were the exact same band of street performers she’d seen yesterday.

However, the outside appearance of the centaur, cat sith, and kobold had become entirely different. Back then, they had been surrounded by a large audience appreciating them for both their performance and lovable appearance. It seemed that had been nothing but sheep’s clothing.

Now, their fur was gone, revealing surfaces of pure steel. It was a group of mechanical performers that not only played, but also *were* instruments. A lovable band of merry-makers no longer, they’d turned into machines of murder.

Needless to say, their audience was nowhere in sight.

Anything within their vicinity shattered and crumbled, leaving behind nothing but a desert-like expanse.

“And I truly believed that you were just a skilled band of performers,” said Marie. “I guess your presence here means that I can take you for an enemy.”

Her perception skills and experience as a Master told her that the opponent before her was not to be trifled with.



“You guess correctly,” the man replied, not with a voice, but with sound. The creatures’ music itself gained word-like meaning and reached her ears.

“May I have your name?” she asked.

“The club on the board,” he replied. “King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.”

“I see.”

“Club” was the title Franklin had given to one of his confidants here in Gideon. Unlike the traitors, whom Franklin had picked up here in the kingdom, the club was an actual member of the Triangle of Wisdom. And King of Orchestras was a Superior Job, just like Marie’s Death Shadow.

He must be quite strong, she thought, assuming that his Embryo was Legion, like hers. She realized that trying to avoid him and going after Franklin wasn’t an option.

Even if I do somehow get to Franklin, I’d just end up being flanked between him and this fellow, and that’s certainly not something I can handle... Man, he’s such a nuisance.

She heaved a long sigh and brandished her weapon, Arc-en-Ciel. “You’re in the way, so just die already.”

“Why the rush, sweet listener? Take the time to listen to the song. It’s *your requiem*, after all.”

After Veldorbell raised his baton, the surroundings became overwhelmed by a wild exchange of explosive and crashing sounds.

And so began *one* of that evening’s intense duels — Death Shadow, Marie Adler VS King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.

Chapter Four: Battle of the Artists

???

This is a story of a certain man.

He was a composer bearing musical talent that placed him among the greatest of his generation. Even those without an ear or mind for music would often see his name on movie credits.

The man dreamed of making an opera. It had been a dream for most of his life — ever since a particular opera had enchanted his young self.

He wished to depict the life of a true hero. The champion would not be based on any existing legend, and his opera would show the hero's life from start to finish, displaying people's joy, anger, grief, and *raison d'être* in a seamless chain of song and story.

That was extent of his vision.

And yet it couldn't come true.

His outstanding track record had made it more than obvious that he could not only handle the opera's musical composition, but the script and production, as well.

And yet it couldn't come true.

If he had communicated his intention to make an opera, countless sponsors would've jumped in to support him.

And yet it couldn't come true.

A certain person was stopping him from giving shape to the vision he'd always dreamed of, and that person was *himself*.

Though the vision within him was very much alive, it was so vague and fragile that it always crumbled the moment he tried to make it more concrete.

He'd spent many a day in front of his desk, thoroughly troubled by his inability to create what he so desired. Though he'd composed countless musical masterpieces during his long life, facing his own dream caused him to stagnate.

It took a whole two years of such distress for him to come to know the reason.

I see... I can't create it because there's none of it within me.

The story he'd envisioned was failing to take shape because he knew nothing of the battles and struggles of heroes. No matter how hard he'd tried to give shape to his dream, it had always instantly felt fake and vanished. At least, that was the conclusion he'd arrived at.

But then, how do I come to know the battles of heroes?

He himself was far too old to set foot on the battlefield, and it needn't be said that it would all be meaningless if he died there. Not to mention that the sagas he'd sought simply didn't exist in the modern world.

Why wasn't I there during the times when knights thrived? Why couldn't I witness legends be born?

Upon realizing that such experiences were lost to the world he was part of, the man despaired, compromised his desire, and began to accept the fact that he might have to present his dream work in a half-baked state.

That was when...

"Infinite Dendrogram will provide you with a new world and your very own unique possibility."

...those words reached his ears.

The words "new world" caught his attention, and he soon found out that it was the promotional line of a certain game.

Though he'd made game music in the past, he'd had next to no experience playing them. However, *Infinite Dendrogram* had a mysterious attraction to it that seemed to pull him inside. Thus, he'd entered the world where he could come to know experiences much like the ones he'd envisioned.



Duel city Gideon, ninth district

Unlike the fourth district, where most of the wares being sold were relatively safe in terms of legality, the ninth district was home to many black markets. Due to that, it was usually about as chaotic as the eighth district — home to pimp and thief guilds — but tonight, it was strangely neat.

That was due to a lack of people and the great reduction in buildings caused by countless explosions and crashes.

At the center of all the destruction, there were two people.

One of them was the Death Shadow, Marie Adler — the PK often referred to as the "Superior Killer."

The other was the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell, and the three parts of his Embryo — a group that had given the death penalty to many formidable Masters of the kingdom.

Both he and Marie had Superior Jobs and high-rank Embryos in their sixth form. Excluding the overwhelmingly mighty Superiors, who didn't even break a hundred in total number, these two were among *Infinite Dendrogram's* most powerful.

As one would expect of a battle between such entities, the damage it caused to the surroundings was grave enough to liken it to a natural

disaster.

However, anyone observant enough would see that only one of the two was responsible for all the destruction.

The crumbling buildings, plants, and paving were all Veldorbell's doing, but that certainly didn't mean that Marie was considerate of her surroundings.

"Tch..." she clicked her tongue as she filled every one of Arc-en-Ciel's chambers with Red Burst and fired bullet creatures made of pure explosive power at her opponent.

Their damage potential was great enough to instantly kill low-ranks and not be taken lightly by high-ranks. If they landed on Veldorbell, the buildings surrounding him would certainly be blown away.

However, not a single one of them hit. All the bullet creatures shattered and exploded midair a little over a hundred metels away from Veldorbell.

Damn it. No matter how much I shoot, none of my bullets get close, Marie thought in frustration.

The phenomenon was caused by one of Veldorbell's Embryo abilities. It was an area-of-effect attack that crushed everything within a range of several hundred metels and reduced it to dust — a property which let it double as defense, as well.

The battle so far and the information she'd gathered yesterday were enough for her to be certain of what had caused all this destruction.

It's sound... she thought. No doubt, Veldorbell's attacks were all caused by air vibrations.

Then again, the way they shattered physical objects made it painfully obvious that there was more to them than that.

Just like my onmitsu grouping is a branch of the ninja grouping, musician jobs also have branches for songs and instruments and the like, Marie thought. *With that in mind, this King of Orchestras fellow is probably in... the conductor grouping.*

The conductor grouping contained jobs focused on conducting orchestras, and those with jobs in it were generally equipped with abilities that increased the effects of the party members' musical skills.

No musician jobs were battle-oriented, and were they to participate in fights, they would either buff their allies or apply debuffs to the enemies. Thus, the conductor grouping could be considered a support job for support jobs.

Of course, that's something I've never encountered in battle before, Marie added silently.

And yet, the power demonstrated by Veldorbell put him among the most destructive forces Marie had ever faced. Even more when she

discounted Superiors. Clearly, it wasn't anything she'd have expected from a "support job for support jobs."

Seems like his Embryo evolved to have some offensive music skills, she thought. This destruction is the result of him using his skills as King of Orchestras to greatly magnify their power.

She was also confident that he had skills that reduced MP consumption. After all, he'd been channeling this lethal, ultimate skill-like attack since the beginning of the battle, which would be impossible unless he had something that compensated for the cost.

My guess is that, rather than crumbling the objects by matching the resonance frequencies, the sound is causing destruction through a high output of air vibrations... shockwaves, basically. After all, even her bullet creatures were getting destroyed before they could reach Veldorbell.

"It pains me to admit it, but I'm at a compatibility disadvantage here," she muttered.

Marie was completely correct. Though the bullet creatures from her Arc-en-Ciel had high utility due to their many types, they were all living creatures, and as such received great damage upon entering the vibration field.

That applied to Marie, as well. It rendered her incapable of using her other forte — hiding her presence and performing a close-range sneak attack on her opponent. It was fair to assume that Veldorbell had no intention of disabling the vibration field until he consigned her to a death penalty.

Now, how do I go about this...?

Marie was a veteran player bearing the title of "Superior Killer." The Masters she'd defeated were far too many to count. Naturally, she wasn't unfamiliar with situations in which she was at a disadvantage in terms of either power or compatibility. She was the Superior Killer exactly *because* she'd won against such odds.

Marie pondered. *I have Ellie to worry about, so maybe I should just use Daisy or Shirahime?*

Just like any sufficiently experienced Master, Marie had an ace up her sleeve — her ultimate skill. Were she to use any of those available to Arc-en-Ciel, she could probably make it through this predicament.

But if I use them here, I'll have fewer options when fighting Franklin.

Though Arc-en-Ciel's ultimate skills were powerful, using them came at a great cost. If she used them here, there was no doubt that she wouldn't be in top form when facing Franklin.

Trying to defeat a Superior while not being at her best was nothing but a fool's errand. Not to mention that she assumed Franklin had yet to show even a tenth of his total battle potential.

Now that she'd failed to kill him with that surprise attack on the Night Lounge, it was safe to expect an all-out battle next. And when it

came to not showing their full potential, she assumed her current opponent, Veldorbell, was the same.

It was obvious that there was more to his Embryo abilities than this vibration field. At the very least, it was mixed with two more attacks.

My passive skill that counters mental debuffs is flaring up... I guess he's also using some sound-based hypnosis.

The onmitsu grouping had high mental debuff resistance to begin with, and Marie was the grouping's Superior Job. Not only that, she'd spent some of the afternoon mock-fighting Rook, who'd somehow found out her true identity, and thus had equipped an accessory that increased her resistance to Charm and similar status effects. Due to that, she was able to negate the effects of Veldorbell's hypnosis, but it was obvious that it was very real and had a greater range than the vibration field.

Then, there's another... Marie thought as her Danger Perception skill flared up and she let her survival instincts make her jump to the right.

A moment later, something invisible passed through the space where she'd just stood.

The Danger Perception skill flared up yet again, and she quickly dodged while kicking up a piece of rubble, which instantly got split in half. The cross-section was abnormally smooth and sharp.

"Cutting" with sound... she thought. *Seems like an ultrasound scalpel to me.*

Though it had little to do with surgery, the surgical precision was definitely there. The cut reminded her of the ultrasound attacks used by a certain kaiju from an old movie.

Needless to say, it wasn't a feat that the laws of physics allowed. However, they weren't on Earth, but in *Infinite Dendrogram* — a world where magic was taken for granted.

It's a magic-leaning musical skill... I'm honestly quite impressed by his Embryo's rich variety, especially when considering that it's bound to nothing but sound.

Ultra vibration waves.

Hypnotic sounds.

An ultrasound scalpel.

Marie guessed that each of these skills was used by one of his Legion of three.

Type Legion is generally split into two categories: those that do nothing but grow in number or those that are few, but are each equipped with a different skill. It's quite clear that Veldorbell is a prime example of the latter.

Distributing abilities generally made them weaker, but Veldorbell

used his skills as King of Orchestras to compensate for that and make them even stronger than before.

Experienced as she was, Marie felt pressure that was equivalent to or even greater than the one she'd felt when facing three sixth-form Guardians.

"What a troublesome enemy," she muttered.

Being a Superior Job and a Master of a sixth-form Embryo, she knew better than most that people like her already had one foot in the realm of Superiors. That went double for cases where Embryos and jobs had superb synergy.

"Troublesome, indeed... And yet..."

Due to that, she could easily tell that Veldorbell was a formidable foe. However...

"The music itself is just so... enchanting."

Though the vibration field was a true hell where everything shattered and crumbled, the music reaching the soundscape outside of it was simply magnificent and nothing short of moving.

While gathering data for her manga, Marie — or, rather, Nagisa Ichimiya — had once gone to listen to a famous orchestra's classical concert. It had been grand enough to leave her astonished, but not even that could hold a candle to Veldorbell's performance resounding throughout the battlefield.

Marie certainly wasn't the only one who felt that way. There had already been a few city inhabitants who, despite all the chaos in town, had wandered towards them, enchanted by the melody and searching for its source. Then they had run away when they'd realized that it was caused by a deadly battle.

"I wonder if it only sounds great because of your skills as King of Orchestras," muttered Marie.

"Who knows?" Veldorbell's music turned to words as he replied. "At the very least, I wrote the score myself."

Though the destruction and the heavenly performance had thrown the soundscape around him into chaos, Veldorbell could still hear her speak.

The hundreds of metels between them would have made conversation impossible even if the vibration field hadn't been there. However, Veldorbell was using some sound-transfer skills to allow a proper exchange between them.

"Yourself...? That's quite impressive," said Marie. "However, that makes it even harder for me to understand something... Why are you in a robot production clan? You seem like you'd be more comfortable in an art or battle clan."

"Don't assume I don't take part in their production activities," replied Veldorbell. "Just a short while ago, I helped them with the

composition of the Grand Marshall's new opening song."

"Gran...?"

While speaking truths which sounded like jests, Veldorbelt continued *playing* his words.

"The reason why I joined is simple. Franklin won the previous war, and I'm certain that he'll become a crucial part of many future battles, as well. Sooner or later, he might become a hero... or get defeated by a hero, instead. I honestly do not care."

"Hero?" Marie repeated.

"Yes. I wish to see the birth of a true hero... to see a champion rise up before my very eyes."

Though the voice reaching her ears through the music wasn't natural, Marie felt immense amounts of passion in it.

"In that case, why didn't you team up with King of Beasts or Hell General?" she asked.

"I couldn't relate to either of them."

Marie was about to say something along the lines of "Yet you could relate to *that*?" but she simply didn't.

She wasn't restraining herself from saying it, she just felt like it wasn't the time for such talk.

Before she'd realized it, the music had turned silent and the effective range of the vibration field began to shrink.

Is he out of MP...? Wait, no!

Disregarding Marie's perplexity, Veldorbelt spun his baton and stopped. It was a motion signaling the end of a performance.

Seemingly obeying his command, the three mechanical beasts comprising Veldorbelt's Embryo stopped playing. With the end of the heavenly music, the destruction of the surroundings also ceased. Despite that, Marie couldn't see this as a golden opportunity to attack him.

Her perception skills weren't flaring up. However, her womanly intuition... or perhaps her instincts as an animal were warning her about some grave danger.

"Percussion's solo. Strings and Wind, take to tuning," said Veldorbelt, using his own vocal chords for the first time since the battle had begun.

At his words, the kobold went forward and readied its drum. The cat sith and the centaur stood behind it, pulled cables out of their mechanical bodies and connected to the kobold.

"Ah...!"

The feeling from before did a complete 180. Now, Marie felt an impetus to act and stop whatever they were doing as soon as possible.

But before she could move, Marie started coughing up blood.

"Guagh!"

And that wasn't the extent of it — she began bleeding from her eyes and ears, as well, and the dizziness accompanying it all left her unable to move her body properly.

Damage...? What's going o—?

That was when she realized that, despite the performance being over, the dust around her was still vibrating as though caught in a tidal wave of sound.

It's high-volume sound... in a frequency below the human audible range! Low-frequency soundwaves had a wavelength of less than 20hz — the lower limit of what humans could hear. However, sounds didn't stop existing just because people couldn't hear them. Just like audible sounds of great volume could force a person to cover their ears, megavolumes of low-frequency sound could shatter eardrums and damage the nerves despite not being heard.

But what's causing it... Wait... Up!

Using her Conceal Reveal skill, Marie looked up at the sky.

There, she saw a night sky and a celestial body much like the Earth's moon, before which there was a silhouette of a harpy with a keyed instrument hanging on it, which it skillfully played with its talons.

“A fourth!” Marie exclaimed as she came to understand Veldorbell's intentions.

The reason why he'd spent the past few days performing in the central plaza was to give the people the impression that his Legion consisted of just three creatures. That increased the effectiveness of the surprise attack from the hidden fourth and set his enemy up for his more powerful skills.

That was Veldorbell's score — his orchestra.

Marie looked at the harpy up in the sky.

Oh, I see, she thought, realizing that Veldorbell's bird-like hat was just another way for him ensure that no one expected the harpy.

Upon realizing what his Embryo's motif was, most would question the lack of a bird, and the mask was there to prevent that. Veldorbell had been writing the score for the flow of this battle long before it even began.

The harpy landed next to its Master, and connected to the kobold via cable, just like the other two. Seeing the Legion of four all in one place, Marie became all the more certain of what she was looking at.

The centaur was the donkey.

The cat sith was the cat.

The kobold was the dog.

The harpy was the rooster.

It was a group of four animal musicians. Thus, Veldorbell's Embryo was...

“Beast Orchestra — Bremen, ‘Percussion.’”

The name came in the form of the ultimate skill. The focused emission of ultra vibration waves that followed engulfed the surroundings, and Marie with them.



Bremen was the four-in-one Type Legion Embryo belonging to the King of Orchestras, Veldorbell.

Strings was the centaur playing a violin.

Wind was the cat sith playing a flute.

Percussion was the kobold banging a bass drum.

Clavier was the harpy playing a piano.

Each of the four was set with their role and could even play sounds from other musical instruments of the same type, and the resulting melodies were great enough to surpass large-scale orchestras.

When in battle, they attacked and destroyed the enemies with Strings’s ultrasound scalpel, Wind’s hypnotic music, Percussion’s vibration waves, and Clavier’s low-frequency soundwaves.

Veldorbell, being a man who’d dedicated his life before *Infinite Dendrogram* to music and was now seeking battle, felt that the abilities of his Embryo were simply tailor-made for him. He wasn’t unique in that regard, for most Masters were more or less pleased with their Embryo powers and could understand why they were as they were.

Many would claim that being unable to dislike a power born from oneself was only obvious. However, there were always exceptions, and Veldorbell was one of them.

Indeed, he was pleased with its abilities, but when his Embryo had hatched, he couldn’t help but be disgusted by its *motif*.

Each and every Embryo was based on Earth’s myths, legends, fairytales, champions, or natural phenomena, which set their name and appearance.

Veldorbell’s Bremen was based on “The Town Musicians of Bremen” — a children’s tale that most people in civilized countries were familiar with. And that motif was exactly what Veldorbell disliked.

“The Town Musicians of Bremen” is about a group of animals that set out on a journey with the vision of becoming a musical band, he thought. However, on the way, they get a warm house and food from a bunch of robbers and are so satisfied with it that they start living there... compromising on their vision.

Being someone who had a dream and strove make it come alive, Veldorbell simply couldn’t tolerate what they were.

Feeling as though they represented his foolishness from the time when he’d thought of compromising and presenting his vision in a

half-baked form, Veldorbell continued hating the appearance of his Embryo.

But at the same time, he...



The vibration waves faded away at the speed of sound, bringing about an uncomfortable silence.

The trajectory of the attack was covered in pulverized solid objects... the dust it had left behind. Nothing else was there — not even a trace of Marie.

All alone, Veldorbell was standing in the ruined ninth district.

Bremen's ultimate skill, "Beast Orchestra — Bremen," was the type that focused the entire Legion's power into just one of the four and allowed it to release a musical skill that greatly surpassed its usual output.

Due to that, it could have a total of four different effects. The one he'd used now, Percussion, released expanded vibration waves that went on for a few kilometers as they tore the pavement as far as Gideon's outer walls.

That abnormal power was due to the ultimate skill still being counted as "musical," making it benefit from the King of Orchestras' "Orchestral King's Conducting" passive skill, which made all musical skill effects several times greater.

Naturally, it was incomparable to the vibration barrier from before.

There had been no bystanders in its way because they'd been afraid of getting caught in the battle's crossfire, but if there had been, they would've surely been reduced to dust. And that was exactly what seemed to have happened to Marie.

"Sound Search," said Veldorbell, causing everyone in his Legion besides Percussion to investigate the surroundings.

They started making sound and examining the area like a sonar. Even if something was hidden, he could find it as long as it had physical presence.

"No one's there," he said at last. There were no creatures in the area surrounding him. That could mean that Marie had gotten the death penalty and vanished or that she'd somehow escaped and gone to face Franklin. In either case, Veldorbell was the one who'd won.

"Heart Beat Palpitation, cancel," he said, canceling the skill responsible for the vibration field.

It had been active even after he'd stopped swinging the baton before using his ultimate skill and even after he'd used it. The only moment it hadn't been was when he'd used Beast Orchestra — Bremen.

If Marie had concluded that Veldorbell had ended the performance before using the ultimate skill and decided to close in on him, she'd have died without him having to use it.

"...Well, that certainly cost me a lot," he muttered to himself.

The passive skills available to King of Orchestras not only increased the power of Bremen's musical skills, but significantly reduced their MP and SP cost, as well. Even so, a skill as great as Heart Beat Palpitation wasn't cheap. Keeping it up for a minute had cost Veldorbell, who had a Superior Job, about 4% of his total MP and SP. There was also the cost of the ultimate skill to consider, so he turned off the vibration area to use the relevant restoration items.

A second later, he felt a blade run through his back and split his spine in half.

"?!"

The fatal damage it had caused was negated by the Lifesaving Brooch he had equipped. However, the attack was followed by many more. Before Veldorbell or his Bremen could even do anything, his neck and back was cut several tens of times.

"Heart Beat Palpitation!"

And so, just as Wind created the familiar air vibration field, the attacker backed away at supersonic speed.

"You... You're...?!" he voiced his confusion, speaking through music yet again. The reason he did this was that his natural voice would always be drowned out by the vibration field. As confused as he sounded, however, he didn't even need to ask to know the identity of the attacker.

"That's sixteen with the right and twenty with the left," said the culprit. "I believe that should take care of the defensive items."

In her right hand, there was an Epic special reward, the paralyzing dagger known as "Palsy Stingblade, Belspan," while in her left, there was the attack trajectory-concealing blade, Night Pain. The one wielding them was none other than the Death Shadow, Marie Adler.

I was too careless, thought Veldorbell. Though his enemy had been nowhere in sight and hadn't appeared on his sonar, he shouldn't have canceled the vibration field. After all, it had been the only thing preventing Marie from attacking him. Without the field protecting him, Veldorbell was a sitting duck, just waiting to be killed.

Indeed, he was the King of Orchestras — a Superior Job. However, that was a job from a non-battle-oriented grouping. Though combining its abilities with those of his Bremen gave him battle potential rivaling that of battle-oriented jobs, he had little in the ways of defensive stats such as END.

Like Marie, with her AGI-focused battle-oriented Superior Job,

had just demonstrated, those who got close to him could kill him ten times before he could even do anything.

Just as she'd explained to Ray, a difference in mid-battle speed could create a difference in the amount of actions the combatants could take during a specific amount of time, and it was often a far more important issue than strategy or skill.

Veldorbelt had survived Marie's onslaught thanks to his equipment, but...

They're all gone now, he thought as he confirmed that not a single one of his defensive accessories remained.

"How did you survive my ultimate skill?" he asked.

"Well, who knows?" she said as she formed an indomitable smile.

Though she didn't show it, she certainly wasn't in a good state. The damage she'd received from Clavier was still there, and her SP was nearly depleted. Her SP was what she'd sacrificed in order to survive Veldorbelt's Bremen — that was the cost of the skill she'd used. Specifically, "Art of Vanishing" — the greatest skill available only to the onmitsu grouping's Superior Job, Death Shadow.

Just as it said in the name, it allowed the user to *vanish* from the world for a limited amount of time. While it was active, nothing could see them, touch them, hear them, or perceive them in any other way. It was stealth perfected, and the only reason why she'd been able to remain unharmed in the face of an attack so devastating.

This skill was also what had made it possible for her to escape the barrier shrouding the central arena. Unlike the Master Jiangshi's Zhenhuo Zhendeng Baolongba, it didn't do any damage whatsoever, but it was still a skill that matched or perhaps even surpassed it.

Naturally, keeping it active came at a cost, and vanishing for a mere minute would completely drain her SP.

This time, she'd kept it up for half a minute, making her lose half of her total SP and leaving it at less than 20%.

However, she believed that it'd been worth it, for she had been able to make her opponent believe she was dead and surprise him with an attack that had deprived him of his accessories.

I should make sure to kill him, no matter what, Marie thought. The moment she'd used Art of Vanishing, she'd already given up on fighting Franklin.

Veldorbelt had turned out to be far stronger and more dangerous than she'd expected, and she figured that if she didn't defeat him here and now, the chances of someone else defeating Franklin would drop, too. Thus, Marie was now determined to defeat Veldorbelt with all she had. She took out a single bullet from her left hand — specifically, from the Embryo crest on it.

The cartridge was about three times the size of the bullets she

usually put in Arc-en-Ciel. Its sides were red and black and *it had the picture of a character on it.*

"It can't end here. I cannot accept not witnessing what happens tonight." Veldorbell was speaking through his music.

"I have a feeling that history will be made here — that tonight will be legendary."

Despite being artificial, the voice in his music had more emotion than it would have if he'd spoken using his own chords.

"Thus, I cannot make my exit until I burn that moment into my retina and etch it onto my soul."

The eyes below his bird-like hat became bloodshot as his music-voice turned louder.

"If I don't... I'll never be able to complete my work!"

He was a prime example of a person who truly desired something. Marie... Nagisa Ichimiya saw such a person in the mirror far too many times to count.

"...Oh, I see," she whispered as a certain realization hit her.

"You're much like me."

Both he and her had come to this world to gain something they didn't have and to experience what they needed to continue their works. On that front, Marie and Veldorbell were the same.

And yet, Nagisa Ichimiya AKA Marie didn't hesitate.

"But I'll still have to ask you to leave, old man."

Veldorbell was in the way of her goal, and if she didn't take care of him, yesterday's memories with the little girl might become shrouded in sadness. Thus, she had no qualms about destroying this man, even though he was much like herself.

"You can't force me, you uncouth girl!" he said through his music before stopping it and using his real voice to shout a skill name. "Final Orchestra!"

That was the King of Orchestras's ultimate job skill. It was a desperate measure that sacrificed 90% of his health in exchange for making musical skills ten times more powerful.

A moment later, the four members of Bremen connected yet again, ready to use the ultimate skill to take care of Marie once and for all.

"Uncouth?" she asked indignantly. "Do excuse me, but superficial politeness is part of my character, you see." She spun her Embryo, the gun in her hand.

Suddenly, the Embryo's shape underwent a great change. No longer the six-shooter it had been before, Arc-en-Ciel had become a single-shot, high-caliber handgun. Marie loaded it with the large bullet she'd taken out of her crest and aimed it at Veldorbell.

She wasn't making use of her supersonic movement abilities. It was difficult to tell whether she was just being careful about the

possibility of having it used against her or if she just wanted to give this man — who was much like her — a fair fight.

The two combatants braced themselves. Though the distance between them was great, it didn't matter at all, for the attacks they'd prepared were fatal regardless. The exchange that would soon follow would decide the victor and the loser.



After a moment of silence, the two made their moves.
“Phantasmal Raingun — Arc-en-Ciel, ‘Daisy Scarlet the Explosion Death!’”

“Beast Orchestra — Bremen, ‘Wind!’”

Two ultimate skills clashed, finally ending the battle.



The ultimate skill of Beast Orchestra — Bremen came in four different forms.

Strings’s magic slashes.

Percussion’s wide-scale physical attack.

Clavier’s stealth low-frequency wave attacks.

And Wind’s hypnotic music.

Veldorbell chose the only one of the four that didn’t do any damage. Most would question this choice, but he had a total of three perfectly valid reasons.

The first was the possibility of Marie avoiding Percussion’s damage, just like she had before.

Veldorbell didn’t know how Marie had survived the first Beast Orchestra, and thus believed that the same skill would be countered by the same skill.

The second was the existence of defensive accessories. Veldorbell had survived Marie’s onslaught because of such items. If Marie also had some of these equipped, it was entirely possible that simple attack power wouldn’t be enough to end her.

The same reasoning had applied to the first Beast Orchestra, but back then, he hadn’t had a choice, as picking any other of his Legion would have made him deactivate Percussion’s vibration field after using the ultimate skill.

Wind’s hypnotic music, on the other hand, would cause the opponent to die regardless of any accessories.

The third reason — and the most important one — was the very melody resounding when Veldorbell combined the King of Orchestras’s ultimate job skill with Bremen’s ultimate skill.

The most perfect music he had at his disposal in such a state was the one played by Wind. Veldorbell was absolutely certain that it could move the listener’s heart, mind, and soul. The music played by Wind when it was supported by Bremen and the King of Orchestras was nothing short of divine.

It was simply *to die for*.

Far beyond being just “hypnotic,” the music played by Wind was of such excellence that listeners would actually *give their lives for it*. Some would call it the apotheosis of Charm.

The sound ignored all resistances and had already made many veterans kill themselves.

The power in the divine music had yet to fail him, so Veldorbell had limitless confidence in its effects.

He disliked the motif behind his Embryo. But at the same time, he adored their music more than anyone else in existence.

Veldorbell, a man who hated Bremen's form, but was thoroughly enchanted by its sound, believed in the power of Wind's Beast Orchestra more than anything else in the world. He was absolutely certain that no one could remain alive before this music.

And yet, Wind's melody, that had already defeated countless enemies, failed to fell the woman before him.

"W... Why...?" Veldorbell sputtered, as the life drained from his face. He was surrounded by Bremen — all shattered into little pieces.

The only reason why Veldorbell had survived Marie's ultimate skill even after having sacrificed 90% of his life was the fact that his Legion had jumped in to protect him. However, though he was still alive, his defeat was imminent.

His imminent defeat was the very reason why he'd asked that question.

"Looks like it's my win."

Veldorbell looked up to see *two* people before him.

One of them was, of course, the Death Shadow, Marie Adler. The other was a red girl — the same one that was drawn on the cartridge Marie had loaded into her gun.

A certain group of people would find her appearance and the fangy, ferocious smile to be familiar, for she was a character from Nagisa Ichimiya's manga, *Into the Shadow*. She was called "Daisy Scarlet the Explosion Death."

Arc-en-Ciel's ultimate skill, Phantasmal Raingun, used the same "paint" cartridges that Marie used to create the bullet creatures and focused them on bullets that Marie herself had drawn. The abilities of the creatures depended on the paint used when drawing, and Marie combined the characteristics of her paints to recreate the characters from her manga to the best of her ability.

Daisy Scarlet was the result of combining red and black paint. She was a vampire that could become explosions. Even as she was merely standing there, small bursts were happening in the area around her. Bremen's and Veldorbell's defeat was caused mainly by Daisy's first explosion, which covered everything in a 100 meter radius.

"Why... Why are you alive after hearing Wind's music? It's supposed to make you throw your life away."

Veldorbell didn't find it strange that he was on the verge of dying. Being in such a state after a clash of ultimate skills wasn't uncommon.

However, he couldn't understand why Marie and Daisy were still alive.

Veldorbell already knew that Arc-en-Ciel created bullet creatures. Thus, no matter what kind of creatures Marie created, he would have expected any of them to kill themselves upon hearing Wind's melody. Be they monsters or mechanical dolls, the music was great enough to make them end themselves. Veldorbell couldn't believe that it seemed to have no effect.

"...Oh, sorry," said Marie. "Neither me nor this girl heard the melody."

"You... You didn't hear it?" he replied with pure shock in his voice.

"Yes. After all..." Marie replied as she pointed towards Daisy, "...her explosions blow away the surrounding atmosphere. Sound can't travel when that happens."

An extremely simple reason.

Sounds were vibrations. As such, they could only pass on through things that could vibrate, like air or water. That was why Marie had Daisy blow away the surrounding air to create a wall of vacuum that no sound could pass through.

Simple explosive bullets wouldn't have the power for such a feat, but Daisy, being the result of an ultimate skill, could do it with little trouble.

If Veldorbell had used Strings's magic attack or Percussion's wide-scale attack, this battle might've ended in a draw because they could've broken the vacuum barrier with sheer sonic force. Wind's melody, however, wasn't offensive in nature and was thus useless unless it could reach the opponent.

"A melody to die for..." muttered Marie. "That's something I'd love to hear, but now is not the time for it."

"...Ha," chuckled Veldorbell. "Not lending an ear to good music... you really *are* uncouth."

With his gaze full of disappointment, rather than frustration, he closed his eyes.

Marie aimed the muzzle towards him...

"Goodbye, King of Orchestras."

...and shot his forehead.

Thus ended one of the night's grand battles, and the board no longer had a club on it.



"...Oh, am I tired," Marie heaved a sigh as she fell to her knees. She then reached into her wristband-shaped inventory, took out a high-quality SP restoration item, and slowly began gulping it down.

Thanks to her using Art of Vanishing and Phantasmal Raingun, her SP was almost completely drained. Though she had items to restore it, the SP loss was too great to cover with those alone.

Also, though restorative items that had a weak effect acted quickly, the powerful ones used by Superior Jobs such as herself had a significantly weaker effect when used consecutively.

She'd need some time until she had enough SP to participate in battle again. Not to mention that she was still damaged from the low-frequency wave attacks.

And last, but definitely not least...

"With this, I can't use red or black anymore," she sighed.

Phantasmal Raingun had two major cons to it.

The first was the necessity to draw the characters on the bullet and the fact that she could only keep a maximum of six of them. The Daisy bullet she'd just used was the only one she had, so Marie was now rendered incapable of using Daisy until she drew her again.

The second con was the fact that the paints used to make bullets used by the ultimate skill were rendered inaccessible for the next 24 hours.

The ones used in Daisy were Red Burst and Black Homing. The former was for explosions, while the latter was for homing shots. Now that Marie had used her, she could no longer use her lethal explosive bullets or the ultra-accurate homing bullets for a whole day. This also extended to other Phantasmal Raingun characters that used Red Burst or Black Homing.

The skill was powerful and versatile, indeed, but its demerits were just as great. Marie's Embryo's ultimate skill drew upon her characters in exchange for draining her reserves.

"It doesn't seem like I'll be able to kill Franklin now," she sighed again. "But..."

Just like Veldorbell, Franklin had a weak, non-battle job that surpassed the average battle job due to synergy with his Embryo. Scary as that was, that could be interpreted another way, and...

"They might actually have a chance."

While running away with Elizabeth and during her battle with Veldorbell, Marie had caught glimpses of Ray and Rook heading towards the western gate.

Their opponent was a Superior. Marie had just barely won against Veldorbell, and Franklin was an entity above the musician. In any normal scenario, two newbies' chances of victory were lower than negligible.

Even so...

"*They* might just do it."

Ray already had a history of defeating creatures stronger than

himself, while Rook had been able to cut Marie's arm off despite being a non-battle job. Considering those facts let Marie have hope that they could win and save Elizabeth.

"Heh heh... Still, I can't leave *everything* to them," she said as she threw away the empty restoration item and stood up. "I guess I'll just do what I do best."

With that, Marie Adler began running through Gideon's streets as she melted into their shadows.

Chapter Four-Point-Five: Setting

Paladin, Ray Starling

“Hh... What?!”

As Rook, I, and the three newbie girls accompanying us followed the road leading towards Gideon’s western gate, we were overwhelmed by a destructive sound so great it made me want to shut my ears. It came from our left — the city’s ninth district.

It was the same direction from which we’d heard a musical performance.

I’d found it strange that someone would play music at a time like this, but the blast of sound that’d just reached us was definitely something more than that.

What’s happening? I thought.

“Is that where Franklin is?” I asked myself as I questioned whether we should continue going to the western gate or change directions to the ninth district.

“Apparently, he isn’t among the ones fighting there,” said Rook before I began to ponder.

It wouldn’t have been unlike him to notice something I didn’t, but I found it strange that he’d used the word “apparently.”

“Oh, that isn’t my assumption,” he added. “I got this info from her.” Saying that, Rook looked at one of the three girls accompanying us.

On a slightly unrelated note, while I was on Silver and Rook was riding Marilyn, the three girls were saddled on fluffy, ostrich-like birds called “Landwings” — the easiest-to-get rideable monsters, apparently.

Anyway, the girl Rook looked at was holding a tray-like disk in her hands as she presented it to us. It displayed a map of the area from Gideon’s central arena to the western gate, with Roman numerals between I and VII littered all over it.

“What’s this, uh...?”

Oh, yeah, I haven’t asked for their names yet, I realized.

“M-My name is Kasumi...” she said meekly. “I-I’m a Summoner and th-this is my Embryo... Taijitu.”

Taijitu... I thought, digesting that. A reference to the Investiture of the Gods, I guess.

By the way, the other two girls were Io and Fujinon, a Barbarian Fighter and Mage, respectively.

“My Taijitu shows, uh... the location of the Masters within the area and their Embryo forms...” Kasumi said, explaining her Embryo. “According to this... th-there are two Masters in the ninth district, but they’re both on their sixth forms... s-so I don’t think that they’re Franklin.”

“...What a convenient Embryo,” I said.

Looking at the tray-like disk, I could see a “VII” marker heading towards the western gate, and it was safe to assume that it was Franklin. Thanks to her, I didn’t even have to think about changing directions.

“N-No, I-I just... umm... I-I couldn’t do anything in the p-plaza fight, so... I-I... I’m sorry...”

“Why are you apologizing?” I asked.

“Why,’ indeed.” Nemesis shared my sentiment. After all, Kasumi just helped us out a lot.

“Uohh...” She hid her face as she moved to hide behind the other two girls. She was strangely good at handling the reins.

“Sorry about that!” said Io. “Our girl Kasumi is the shy type, as you can see! Oh, but she’s the one who had the courage to tell us to come with you two! After all, we have some white-haired pretty boy and blond young man B-elRGHH!” Before Io could finish her sentence, Fujinon — the last of the three — cut it short with a backhand blow to her side.

Eh? What was she about to say?

“Sorry about this idiot,” said Fujinon. “Oh, we only accompanied you because we saw you fight in the plaza and became very interested.”

“O-Okay?” I replied.

I wasn’t too convinced, but the aura about Fujinon made me feel like pushing it further wouldn’t be the best idea.

“You three seem to get along very well,” said Rook. “Have you known each other for long?”

“Yes,” nodded Fujinon. “We’re all in the literary club in the same school.”

Friends in real life, huh? I thought. No wonder they all act so familiar.

“To my eye, the ones with the most familiarity are you and Brother Bear,” commented Nemesis.

Well, we’ve been siblings for eighteen years now. ...Oh, but I guess that doesn’t mean much when it comes to my sister. She... She’s just so...

“Ray! What’s wrong?!” Nemesis shouted into my head.

Ah! Damn, my consciousness almost lapsed out of reality.

“This has been bothering me for a while now... what is going on with your sister?” Nemesis asked. “Just like with the glasses, I can’t

see any of your memories about her.”

Please, don't ask. Her very existence makes even less sense than Shu's. She's not even in the same genre as us.

“Anyway, we can now go to the western gate without any hesitation,” I said.

At the rate we were going, we'd be there in five or so minutes. However, though I didn't say them out loud, I had two questions on my mind. Both of them were related to the map displayed by Taijitu.

One was about the central arena, the place currently keeping many Masters inside.

On the map, there were four “VII” markers, which pointed to Superiors. Two of them were most likely Figaro and Xunyu. Though Xunyu might not appear on the map because the barrier had been stopped right after she'd been defeated.

With that in mind, though, who are the other two — or three — Superiors?

The other question was about the surroundings of the western gate, the place we were heading to right now.

According to Taijitu, there were several dozens of Masters there. They had a wide range of Embryo forms, from II to VI. I assumed that a Master with a radar-type Embryo like Taijitu had found out where Franklin was heading and gathered a group with the intention of fighting him at the western gate.

That was very good for our confidence. After all, we needed to stop Franklin, but were severely lacking in numbers.

However, that sentiment of mine almost entirely vanished when I noticed that they *weren't moving at all*.

Taijitu was like an active radar, but the Masters at the western gate were still, as though it was just a picture.

There was only one exception, for the one closest to the gate, marked as “III.” It was making slight movements.

For reasons unknown, that marker was making me feel somewhat uneasy.



Duel city Gideon, the surroundings of the western gate

It happened a few minutes before Ray got a look at Taijitu.

Approximately twenty of the kingdom's Masters had just arrived at the western gate.

All of them were Masters who hadn't been in the arena when it had gotten sealed, and who had happened to not encounter Veldorbell after it all began.

“This is the place, right?” one of them asked.

“Yeah. It's pretty clear that Franklin's planning to escape through

here.”

Using their job or Embryo skills to predict where Franklin was heading, they gathered at the western gate with the intention of ambushing him here.

Their predictions and decisions were correct, for Franklin was about five minutes away.

They were about to prepare themselves for his arrival, but...

“...What’s that?” They encountered a strange sign. It was placed in the middle of the road in a really unnatural manner.

The words on it were in the continent’s common language, and to Masters — who were equipped with auto translation — it said this:

No Master shall pass beyond this point.

“Isn’t that a reference?” one of them asked, examining it. “What the hell is thi—”

“Wait! There’s something over there!” One of the Masters pointed beyond the sign.

There was a large silhouette, standing before the gate as if to prevent anyone passing. It belonged to a Marshall II — no, a Marshall II Revised. It was a humanoid mobile weapon created by the Triangle of Wisdom and fine-tuned for use by a specific individual.

“That’s a Magingear from Dryfe, all right, but it’s a bit different than their official ones or the ones leaked to Caldina,” the other Master agreed. “We might be looking at one of the Triangle’s bigger members. At the very least, he’s not like the player killers messing up the city.”

“He’s probably been put there to make sure that Franklin goes by safely.”

“The mech has higher stats than the average Marshall II, but it’s still just a bit over two times stronger than a Demi-Dragon, at best.”

“Then I guess he won’t be much of a problem for us.”

The Masters gauged the machine’s battle potential using Reveal and Identification. That method wasn’t without its faults. After all, these skills couldn’t see the stats or skills of the Marshall II R’s pilot. However, it was clear that the Masters surpassed him and his machine in terms of both numbers and experience.

“There are way more of us,” one of them said. “We won’t lose even if he uses his Embryo.”

“HA HA! Let’s get to the gate and wait for Franklin! Can’t wait to see his face when we ambush him!”

“‘No Master shall pass beyond this point...’ Heh. As if.”

Thus, the Masters passed the sign and charged towards the Marshall II R. As though he’d been waiting for it, the robot’s pilot spoke up.

“Cyco... ‘La Porte de l’Enfer.’”

“Roger.”

In but an instant, the Marshall II R donned frozen armor as the surroundings underwent a drastic change. Everything within a radius of 200 metels — from the sign to the gate — froze solid. Naturally, the Masters were no exception.

“La Porte de l’Enfer — the enemy dies,” spoke a feminine voice coming from the frost-clad machine.

Her words were mistaken, for no one there had died. They were simply *Frozen*.

“Eh? Huh? All of them? What?” a Master cried.

“...It’s an Embryo skill!” another one shouted.

Those two didn’t have a bit of ice on them.

“*Less than 100*, I see,” said the pilot. “They won’t be much trouble, though.”

Thirteen seconds later, the lower half of one of the remaining two Masters suddenly Froze.

“What the hell is this?!” he shouted.

“Hey, are you okay?!” The other remained unfrozen.

“His number is low,” said the girl’s voice. “He’s probably a support job.”

“A Priest or something, huh?” spoke the pilot. “Very well, then.” Suddenly, the machine aimed the weapon in its left hand — LRW03 Huge Grenade Launcher — towards the two and fired several times.

With a strong impact, the grenades exploded and covered the surroundings in fire.

By the time the smoke faded, the two had already gotten the death penalty and were no longer in sight. Not only that, but the frozen statues that were caught up in the explosion had shattered and were turning into particles of light.

Some of the statues that hadn’t been caught up in it also turned into particles. They had used the suicide feature to forcefully give themselves a death penalty. They’d probably wished to avoid becoming the enemy’s XP or having him Steal something while they were Frozen.

The pilot had no intention of breaking them or taking their items, but they had no way of knowing that.

The pilot in the cockpit sighed. What had just happened was more of a massacre than a battle, but the pilot had been more or less certain that it would be like this. That was the very reason why he was positioned here.

The pilot and his Embryo were the natural enemies of anyone who had this city as their main haunt.

“This frost is strong,” said someone standing at the sign. “But it won’t work on me.”

The person — who hadn't been in the previous group — was completely clad in flame, making his silhouette somewhat hard to discern. The man's ruffled hair and burning body were well known to anyone familiar with Gideon.

"An Embryo that grows in strength when you clear some complicated conditions, huh?" he said. "Well, my Surt is the strongest fire-based Embryo in the kingdom! No amount of cold can freeze it!" He was the seventh in the Kingdom of Altar's duel rankings. His name was...

"I am Bishmal the Raging Blaze! Just try and freeze *this* fire!"

Like an erupting volcano, Bishmal made flames burst from all over his body as he charged towards the Marshall II R. A single look was enough to tell that the fire was immensely hot.

Bishmal the Raging Blaze was said to have a punch that was more destructive than anything anyone else in the duel rankings could do. An attack empowered by his flame could easily melt the frozen armor, Marshall II R, and even the pilot.

But alas...

"You won't pass."

...the man clad in the kingdom's strongest fires was frozen solid. He was still aflame, despite this. The expression stuck on his face was an indomitable smile, showing no doubt that he was going to emerge victorious.

"My La Porte de l'Enfer ignores temperature," said the Marshall II R's frozen armor — the Embryo known as Cyco.

Surrounded by frozen statues, the pilot, Hugo Lesseps, shook his head. "Gideon's Masters are tough. They're all veterans far stronger than me and with far more experience in battle against people. And that's exactly why they can never win against me."

Indeed, the one sealing the western gate was none other than Hugo Lesseps — the very same Master that had helped Ray with the Gouz-Maise Gang.

He was now on the board of Franklin's game, acting under the codename "heart."



As the battle between Marie Adler and Veldorbell came to an end, Franklin and his kidnappee, Elizabeth, were making their way towards the western gate.

Though Marie's attack had put Night Lounge on the verge of death, it was still capable of flight, if only barely. Elizabeth, having lost consciousness, was sleeping on top of it.

"...Looks like we've lost Veldorbell," said Franklin as he examined the map on the device, which no longer had the club marker on it.

The blue marker next to where it had disappeared was gone, as well, but Franklin couldn't tell whether it was due to her dying or simply using a stealth skill like the one she'd used before she'd attacked him.

"Hm..." Franklin clenched and opened his left hand. The action felt somewhat slow.

"Paralysis poison, huh?" he said. "Must be pretty damn strong to have such an effect even after I used an Elixir."

Franklin assumed that the dagger that'd torn his neck had been a special reward focused on paralysis poisoning. He was correct, for Marie's weapon had been Palsy Stingblade, Belspan: a dagger specializing in slow-acting paralysis.

"But it's not like it'd be much of a problem for me if I were unable to lift a finger," he said. To his mind, the only trouble the Superior Killer had caused him was the damage to Night Lounge and the loss of Veldorbell. And when it came to the latter, Franklin didn't believe that the King of Orchestras had gone down without a fight.

"The Superior Killer probably doesn't have the power to fight me anymore," he muttered. "And I don't think we'll have any other exceptions of her level, so... I guess I only have to be wary of a potential one or two Superiors, and..."

There were other exceptions, as well. Franklin already had the details regarding the battle at the central plaza, where the newbies had won against the traitors.

While approaching the western gate, Franklin examined how things were going, and noticed that two of the newbies performed some grand feats that made them stand out from the rest.

Naturally, by virtue of being newbies, they were weaker than the high-rank Masters around the city. However, Franklin was experienced enough to know that people like them should never be underestimated. Not to mention that he was already familiar with one of the two newbies.

"If I'd known this would happen, I wouldn't have messed around with the dog ears, and would've just given him a healthy dose of instadeath poison," Franklin muttered.

He was referring to what he'd done the day before. If Franklin had killed Ray back then, there was a chance that he would've posted about it on the internet, which could've put a dent in his plot. Due to that, the scientist had opted to merely mess around with him while getting some information in the process, but that had come back to bite him.

Things might've gone differently if I'd killed him then and there, he thought. For all I know, the Superior Killer wouldn't have entered the fray if I had... but I guess I'm overthinking it.

“First the Old Orchard, now this... The jackass just can’t stop getting in my way!” Franklin grumbled. “Well, not that it matters anymore.” He grinned. “I have the data, and RSK is complete. As things are, crushing him head-on should be quite satisfying, and a few cameras should make it even better.”

Soon enough, the Night Lounge arrived at the western gate and crashed to the ground. Considering the wretched state it was in, this wasn’t unexpected. Unable to return to the Jewel, Night Lounge breathed its last as it became particles of light and vanished.

“That thing cost me 70,000,000 lir... Oh well, I’ll just make the next one a bit tougher.”

Franklin scooped up Elizabeth with his right hand, the one that wasn’t numb, and began walking towards the gate. In a moment, a sign saying “No Master shall pass beyond this point” entered his vision.

“I think I remember this,” Franklin said. “It’s from a Japanese folk tale. One of those witty ones, I think. How nostalgic.”

Franklin casually passed the sign and looked at the area around the gate. He saw a mechanical warrior, standing there like the guardian of the gates of Hell.

That description couldn’t be more appropriate. After all, the frost permeating the area and the many frozen Masters littered all over the surroundings made the scene highly reminiscent of the Ninth Circle of Hell.

“What a spectacle,” Franklin said as he walked through it, clearly amused.

He showed no signs of getting frozen like the other Masters.

In fact, he didn’t feel the least bit cold, and the same applied to the tian he was holding, Elizabeth.

“Ah, hey, this is Bishmal. Guy’s seventh in the duel rankings,” Franklin said upon noticing a man frozen while adorned in raging flames. “Ice to meet you!” he said in a playful tone as he kicked the statue away.

With no hint of resistance, Bishmal dropped to the ground, shattered, and turned into particles of light.

Onlookers would question whether an act like this should be so simple and done so casually.

“If you froze them, you might as well shatter them, you know?” Franklin said to the person inside Marshall II R, Hugo.

“I didn’t want to waste my ammo, and moving in to crush them costs MP,” Hugo answered. “I have to save it so I can keep La Porte de l’Enfer up for longer, right?”

Sounds like a waste of potential EXP to me, thought Franklin before speaking up again.

“What’s the setting right now, anyway?”

“We’re only targeting Masters that don’t belong to the Triangle of Wisdom,” Hugo answered. “Before these Masters came, the tians from the Royal Guard passed through. They’re waiting outside.”

“Oh? The Royal Guard? They didn’t attack you?”

“I’d already put the sign up at that point, so they knew that I had no intention of fighting non-Masters.”

“That might’ve been for the best,” Franklin said. “Attacking tians outside of war gets you on wanted lists, after all... Which is exactly why it’s obvious that I’m already on Altar’s.”

It was common knowledge that there were no crimes in disputes between Masters. Thus, a Master blocking the paths of or killing other Masters would not be considered a criminal.

“Anyway, if the RG is waiting for me outside, they’re probably planning to face me in an open field battle,” said Franklin. “That’s their specialty.”

“What will you do?” asked Hugo.

“Take them on, duh. This country’s tians ain’t shit.”

In the previous war, Dryfe had killed all the country’s tians with Superior Jobs. To his mind, mere high-ranks weren’t much of an obstacle.

“Oh, by the way, once I pass, change the setting a bit,” Franklin said.

“How?”

“Let Ray Starling pass.”

“...Ray Starling.”

“Yes, Ray Starling. He’s blond, has dog ears... well, not anymore. Anyway, you know him well, Yu. Let him pass.”

“...Why?”

Before answering his question, Franklin made a sinister, devil-like smile. “Because I’m gonna smash the twerp myself, duh. He and I seem to be bound by some weird cosmic mojo, so I’ll crush him and sever the tie once and for all. I even prepared a special monster for it.”

“W-Wait, y-you mean the MGD?!” Hugo spoke up with a voice thick with fear.

It wasn’t without reason. After all, MGD was the biological weapon Franklin had made for the purpose of fighting Superiors.

“Ha ha ha! Wouldn’t that be great? MGD could level the whole city... no — the whole country! Anyway, no, I’m using a different monster. MGD’s not finished yet!” Franklin laughed in an amused manner before continuing. “I’ll be bringing it out after we’re done with the kingdom, when we start warring with Caldina or Legendaria. Though, if this plan fails, we’ll be fighting the kingdom head-on, meaning that they’ll get a taste of MGD, too.”

Hugo was silent. Franklin passed by the Marshall II R's arm and lightly tapped its frozen armor with the back of his hand. "So yeah, let him go by if he comes."

"...Okay."

With that, their exchange was over and Franklin made his way towards the gate.

However, Hugo turned back to look at him before speaking up. "S—"

"Yu..." Franklin cut his words short. "In here, you're supposed to call me 'leader.' Your tone's falling back to old times. Don't let it fall back to old times."

"...Yes, leader."

"So, what did you want?"

"What do you intend to do to the Royal Guard?"

"Don't worry your pretty little head about that one, sweetheart."

With those words as his last, Franklin finally went through the gates.

Hugo could do nothing but watch as he left.

"Hoo boy," said Franklin.

Beyond the gates, there was the western field known as the "Jeand Grasslands," and a group of knights surpassing fifty in number.

"Another spectacle," Franklin said.

All of them were from the Kingdom of Altar's Royal Guard, Paladins tasked with Elizabeth's protection, and all of them showed immeasurable hostility towards Franklin. Standing in front of them was their Vice Commander, Liliana Grandria.

"Franklin, I presume?" she said.

"In the flesh, baby," he replied.

"We are taking Her Highness Elizabeth back."

"I'd rather you didn't. Well, losing her wouldn't actually be a big deal for me, but having her around certainly doesn't hurt." The grin Franklin made as he said that made the knights' hatred for him all the more palpable.

"Then we will take her by force."

"Hmm? You can attack me? I'm holding the princess, you know."

"Do not worry," Liliana informed him. "We Royal Guard are bound by magic that prevents us from hurting our royalty. We will not get a single scratch on her."

"Oh? You have friendly fire disabled? No fair..."

"However, the mere act of pointing my blade in Her Highness's direction pains me greatly, so I would be thankful if you let her go."

"Ah ha ha! Yeah, nah." Franklin stuck out his tongue.

"Grand Cross!"

A torrent of cross-shaped light burst out from the base of his feet. Grand Cross — a Paladin's greatest skill — was an offensive

ability that created a cross-like pillar of holy light, dealing some of the greatest damage available to high-rank jobs. It burst out of and burned Franklin's left side, the one opposite where he was holding Elizabeth.

The surprise attack almost caused him to fall, but he was able to balance himself.

"Well, aren't you rash," he complained as he looked at his chest and saw a Lifesaving Brooch, the accessory nullifying fatal attacks. The attack had left it completely broken, meaning that all the monsters he'd used for Life Link were already dead.

Though the power of the Grand Cross was nothing to sneer at, Franklin was made aware that the surprise attack from the Superior Killer had done more damage than he'd thought.

"Gee whiz... this day certainly isn't easy on my wallet," he muttered as the Royal Guard all charged towards him.

Even though he was a Superior, Franklin's stats were low, and his HP wouldn't last long against more than fifty battle-focused high-rank jobs. However...

"Well, I've been given some good test subjects to prepare for when he comes, so I guess that makes up for it."

...that only applied in scenarios where Franklin didn't do anything.

"Call — RSK."

Thus, Franklin called upon *that* creature.

Chapter Five: Yuri and Hugo

Yuri Gautier

My name is Yuri Gautier. This is the story of my past, and my present.

I was born in southern France, to a family most would call “upper class.” My father was a self-made man of great wealth. My mother was an ex-theater actress, and even I, her child, could tell that she was very gentle and beautiful. I also had an elder sister, who was so smart, pretty, and nice to me that I could never stop boasting about her.

That was my family, and most onlookers would certainly suggest that I was blessed to have been born into such a household. However, as one who’d lived it, I had an entirely different opinion.

Though my father was a business genius, he was also greedy, arrogant, and often mistreated my mother, who bore it all while trying to hide the pain from us to the best of her ability. I could see something similar in my sister, too. Though she was always nice to me, I often felt that she was troubled about something.

I clearly remembered the days when my mother took me to the theater she used to act at before she got married. Her eyes as she looked at the plays weren’t full of enjoyment or nostalgia — they were clouded with regret.

I could also recall seeing my sister in her room, clearly troubled by what the future would hold.

I lived my life without any inconveniences to speak of. My mother, sister, and even father were all nice to me. The world itself was a gentle place for me to be in. However, it seemed to be getting gradually worse for both my mother and sister.

That was my life for most of my childhood... until my parents got divorced.

And the reason why they did that was my sister’s disappearance.

She’d disappeared without a trace after leaving a farewell letter, and though I didn’t get to read it, it was obvious that she’d left of her own accord. I knew her reasons for doing that, and so, while I found it sad, I didn’t think that it was the least bit strange.

Until a few years ago, my sister had been learning arts and crafts from our maternal grandfather. What had led her to this was the death of Dylan, our pet iguana.

It had made us both very sad, so our grandfather had tried to

cheer us up with a handmade plaster figure that looked exactly like Dylan. Though our grandfather hadn't been good enough at this craft to be a recognized artist, my sister had liked the result very much — enough to try her hand at it herself while having our grandfather teach her. She continued making plaster figures even after he passed away.

The day before she disappeared, all the figures she'd made had been shattered, along with everything else our grandfather had left behind.

The one who did it was our father.

“How long can you keep doing this?! You're already arranged for marriage! He won't like the smell these things make!” he'd shouted as he shattered them one by one.

Standing before the pieces, my sister looked at him with the coldest eyes imaginable, left a letter, and simply walked out.

My father became furious, while my mother released the resentment she'd been holding in.

“This is all because she got involved with your old man and this stupid hobby!” yelled my father.

“No! It's all because you were never considerate of her feelings!” shouted my mother.

And so, this incident led to the obvious conclusion — divorce.

I was left in my mother's care, and the two of us moved to live away from him. From that time on, I was haunted by a certain thought:

I should've protected them.

Perhaps it was a childish idea, but I truly believed that things wouldn't have turned out this way if I'd been there for my mother and sister.

I sincerely wished that I could be someone able to protect them, like one of those noble princes or knights from the theater plays my mother often took me to. But at that point, I was already old enough to know that my wish would never come true, so I locked the desire away within me.



However, a few years after the divorce, a certain thing actually made my wish come true.

It was a game called *Infinite Dendrogram*.

In its promotional line, it promised to “provide you with a new world and your very own unique possibility.”

I, Yuri Gautier, entered this world and became Hugo Lesseps — a High Pilot from the Dryfe Imperium.

Hugo was tall and always acted like a noble young man. I based

his behavior on what I'd learned from the plays I saw, and I put a lot of effort into making it work. I also might've inherited some of my mother's acting talent.

I wanted Hugo to be the realization of the wish I'd had since I was young: to be a knight that protected women and defeated any tragedies threatening them. I wished for my role as Hugo to be that of a beautiful flower's thorn.

If there were no knights to protect women from tragedy, I'd become one myself.

That wish of mine might've been warped, but I'd continued playing this role for the entire month — or three months in game time — since I'd started *Infinite Dendrogram*.

But now, I'd become part of a plan which forced me to discard my role.

The plan was the result of cooperation between The Triangle of Wisdom and The Dryfe Imperium's prime minister faction.

It was a wide-scale project that covered the entire city of Gideon, bringing tragedy to the innocent people living there. It even involved the kidnapping of a princess.

Normally, Hugo — the symbol of my ideal — would've avoided participating in the project even if it meant quitting the clan, but I had two reasons why I simply had to get involved.

The first was the fact that the success of this plan would greatly reduce the number of victims in the long term. If it caused the kingdom to give up, the war between it and the imperium would end without any more bloodshed. If this plan didn't end the kingdom, the lives lost in the upcoming battles would be numerous. After all, about half of the imperium really wished for that to happen.

The country was split into two... or rather, three factions: The prime minister faction, the field marshal faction, and the emperor faction.

Prime Minister Vigoma was responsible for the country's internal affairs, and he was deeply troubled by the drop in national power due to the money they'd spent on the previous war. Back then, the imperium had gone crazy spending money to buy as many Masters as possible. That had resulted in Dryfe's victory, but it certainly hadn't been good for public finance. Not to mention that the kingdom had remained unconquered, meaning that the imperium had gotten far less than what they'd paid for.

And with the bar now being set, the reward couldn't be lowered. If Dryfe were to do that, the Masters would be as displeased as the kingdom's Masters had been when they hadn't been offered anything, which would result in a significant drop in participants. However, a reward like before could only be prepared one more time, and even if

Dryfe ended up winning, the state of public finance would be horrid.

Therefore, the prime minister's faction had prepared this plan for the purpose of ending the war before it could restart. The Triangle of Wisdom had become a part of it because the imperium was their sponsor and they didn't want its economy to crash.

The faction led by the one in charge of the army, Field Marshall Barbaros, had a different opinion about what would be best.

It was nearly completely certain that war wouldn't end with just the kingdom and that Legendaria or Caldina would instantly become Dryfe's new enemies. Therefore, he believed that the best course of action was to demonstrate the imperium's might and military prowess while showing off the great rewards the country could give its Masters.

With that, Dryfe would attract new Masters and, in turn, increase its battle potential, deterring countries like Caldina from attacking them. The field marshal also believed that the money spent could be made up for with the kingdom's national treasury.

The one taking his side was the leader of the devil army: Hell General, Logan Goddhart. But he was merely a man who wanted battles where he could show off, so what interested him more was the method, rather than the goal.

Those two ideas had torn the country in half.

The third faction was the one led by the emperor himself. However, this faction didn't seem to have any solid ideas regarding the situation, nor did they comment on the two other factions, so that only served to polarize the country even further.

"The emperor doesn't care which faction wins this," said my clan leader. "To him, what matters isn't the process or the result, but the *goal*."

I didn't know what he'd meant by this, but eventually, the two factions had come to an agreement.

The prime minister's faction would go first, and if their plot worked and ended in the kingdom's annexation, the field marshal's faction would accept the results. However, if it failed and the war continued, the field marshal would get all the rights to restart the invasion.

If that happened, then the kingdom would surely suffer. Even if Dryfe won, they probably wouldn't stop at killing just the army or the Masters. It was entirely possible that the kingdom would lose far more than they would during the plan.

Therefore, I had to choose between a tragedy in the present or a calamity in the future.

I chose the former.

The plan would've happened even if I hadn't gotten involved, so

I'd joined with the intention of increasing its success rate and ending it all right here and now. That was the first reason why I'd participated in the plan.

The second reason was extremely personal in comparison.

While the first reason was based in my role as Hugo, the second reason was completely my own.

It was because I greatly respected the main mind behind the plan, the one that most in *Infinite Dendrogram* knew as "Mr. Franklin."

"He" was the one who'd invited me to this world, who had instantly taken me to the clan, and who had helped me out with getting started. Not to mention that I myself wanted to be at Franklin's side and give him the help he needed.

My own feelings were half of the reason why I was standing here as one of the main parts of the plan.

That meant that, while half of my reason for getting involved in this tragedy was obligation, the other half was nothing but my own ego. This fact troubled me greatly.

Then he had come to me and promised that the player killers and the monsters would *only attack Masters*.

The monsters were designed in a way that limited their targets to Masters, while player killers wouldn't go for tians because they didn't want to get on wanted lists. With those facts, he promised that loss of tian life would be reduced greatly.

To him, harm done to tians didn't matter all that much, yet he promised this to me out of consideration for my feelings. Because of this, I'd decided to believe him and do my best to make the plan a success and to prevent the calamity from happening.

For the sake of being at his side and because of the trust between us, I — Hugo Lesseps the machine knight of ice and roses — had become a cog in this tragedy.



And so came the day of the plan. It began the moment Figaro and Xunyu's duel in the central arena reached its conclusion.

The player killers in Gideon started hunting Masters as the few monsters released began destroying the city.

To take my mind off all the turmoil, I closed my eyes and silently sat in the seat of the Marshall II R that he'd given me.

About ten minutes after the plan began, I heard the sound of hooves galloping on the pavement. Then there were voices.

"That's a Magingear from Dryfe!"

"It's there to stop us from saving Her Highness!"

There was quite a bit of distance between us, but I could hear the contents of their conversation due to one of the Marshall II R's skills:

Sound Collection.

I looked through the monitor showing the camera eye's output and saw that they were Paladins from the Royal Guard. Everyone in that group was a person of this world, not a Master. Therefore, they weren't my targets.

I moved the Marshall II R's arm and pointed at the sign I'd set up before the plan began.

"No Master shall pass beyond this point...' That means we are allowed, yes?" asked a woman clad in flashy armor of pure white.

According to the information I'd been given, I was looking at the Vice Commander of the Royal Guard, Liliana Grandria. She was the exact same person to whom I'd explained the situation yesterday after bringing the children we'd saved from the Gouz-Maise Gang.

"Mh..." Not saying anything, I made my robot nod and moved aside, letting them pass through the gate.

"Very well," she said. "Then we shall pass and wait for Franklin in the Jeand Grasslands."

"Lady Grandria!" shouted one of her subordinates. "Can we really leave this Magingear here?!"

"Fighting in the city puts us at a disadvantage, not to mention that we would be caught between this Magingear and Franklin, once he arrives," Liliana told him. "Moreover, this Magingear is strong enough to be ordered to face Gideon's Masters all by its lonesome. Even if we emerged victorious against such a foe, we would most likely not have the strength to save Her Highness."

"...Understood."

After that exchange, the Royal Guard began going towards the gate while passing by my side. Some were wary of a potential surprise attack, some were tense, while others looked at me with nothing but hatred in their eyes.

This treatment wasn't unexpected. I knew and had already accepted the fact that I was doing something worthy of such reactions.

At the end of their unit was Liliana herself.

Before passing through the gate, she stopped next to my Marshall II R and began speaking. "You are the same person who helped Ray save the children from the Gouz-Maise Gang, yes?"

Though I hadn't said a word, she somehow knew who I was. I couldn't begin to understand what had given it away, but I was somehow able to hide my perplexity.

"You have my sincere thanks for that," she continued. "Also, as myself, rather than the head of the Royal Guard, I have another thing to say..."

She momentarily fell silent and looked at my Magingear's camera eye, staring at me through my monitor before continuing.

“Please don’t upset Ray.”

Unable to say anything back, I merely bowed lightly.

The Royal Guard passed the western gate and began preparing their formation for “his” arrival at the Jeand Grasslands.

Though I couldn’t help imagining what would happen to them in the fight, I could do nothing but turn away.

Franklin came right after I took care of the Masters that followed the Royal Guard. He told me to let Ray Starling pass, saying that he wanted to take care of him himself.

I’d imagined that I would be the one to fight Ray. I’d already told him that “It’s west.” If, by the time the plan began, he remembered the name of the clan I was part of, he would certainly realize that there was more to me saying that.

The reason I’d said that to him was my own hesitation. A single day with him as my comrade had been enough for me to know that he was like me — a person who couldn’t tolerate tragedies and considered the lives in this world to be worth as much as those on Earth.

In this plan, I’d chosen to be the one bringing about the tragedy, and I’d revealed the part of the plot to him exactly because I’d known he would try to stop it. Though I was part of the tragedy, I felt guilty enough to try and help stop it.

I had entrusted my hesitation — my wish to stop the tragedy — to him.



I'd made him the representation of these feelings, to see which side would win.

I was fully aware that it was much like using him as a coin toss. What I'd done was warped, selfish, and ugly, but it was something I just couldn't avoid doing.

After talking to me, Franklin passed the western gate and went outside. It wouldn't be long until he began fighting the Royal Guard.

Looking away from it, I tried my best to ignore the inevitable result of their battle.

A short while later, *he* finally arrived.



Paladin, Ray Starling

The best word to describe the scene before me was "hellish."

The many ice sculptures littered all over the pavement made it somewhat reminiscent of a snow festival I'd gone to when I was little, but the fact that they were actually people frozen solid made my reaction a far cry from the joy I'd felt back then.

All of them had crests on the backs of their left hands, meaning that they were Masters, just like me. Normally, the sight would've left me feeling nothing but fear. However, I'd seen a humanoid frozen in this manner just yesterday, so I had the capacity for other sentiments.

Wordlessly, I looked at a nearby sign.

"No Master shall pass beyond this point?" Nemesis read, her voice resounding in my mind. "I reckon this is a warning."

Most likely. And I suppose the ice statues are what became of the Masters who ignored it, I thought.

Still, a part of me believed that it wasn't a warning. I felt as if it carried the meaning of "I can't and won't let you pass, so please, stay away." However, I might only be seeing it that way because I knew the one who'd created the hell before me.

The meaning of this sign contradicted his inviting me here, but I had a feeling that he was completely aware of that.

"Did you want me to come or not... Hugo?" I called.

"...I'm not sure about that myself, Ray." In the middle of the hell stood a mechanical frame, almost five meters in height and clad in bluish-white armor of frost. Each of its hands held ice blades reminiscent of crosses.

The entity bearing the overall appearance of an icy church was none other than the Type Maiden/Chariot Embryo known as Cocytus, while its Master was the man with whom I'd defeated the Gouz-Maise Gang, Hugo Lesseps. He and I had met again on this very day's afternoon and separated on good terms.

His tone now was very different compared to back then or yesterday. It seemed as though he was feeling very cornered.

"Where's Franklin... your clan leader?" I asked.

"Beyond the gate," he answered. "Right now, he's... fighting the Royal Guard."

"Hh...!"

Liliana's people are fighting him? I thought.

That certainly wasn't unexpected. Franklin had kidnapped the princess, so it was only obvious for them to face him. If it meant protecting what was dear to her, Liliana would ignore any dangers, no matter how great they were. I had known that part of her character ever since my very first day in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

"If that's how it is, we'll be passing through," I said.

"You can pass, but I can't say the same for your friends," he said as he made his Magingear point at Rook and the three girls behind me. "That is my role in this."

Wait... "You can pass?" What? I thought. "Why am I allowed?"

"I wasn't the one to decide that. 'He...' the boss... wants to fight you himself."

I was astonished. *Franklin wants to fight... me? But the only link between us is the dog ear drug he gave me yesterday. Not to mention that I'm a newbie and there are many people stronger than me, so... why is he singling me out?*

"Why?" I asked.

Hugo said nothing. Perhaps not even he knew the reason.

"...What matters here is that you can pass," he spoke up. "If you wish to stop him and save the princess... then go."

Hugo then moved to the side, clearing a path for me.

If I went on ahead, it would mean leaving Rook and the others behind, not to mention that...

"Go on ahead, Ray," said Rook, as if he knew what I was thinking. Of course, he probably *did*, and that was exactly why he'd said it.

"You're troubled by two things at once... by what's going on here and beyond the gates, yes?" he continued. "Then you should hurry up and go. I will fight this person in your stead."

"Rook..."

He clearly knew the questions that concerned me right now: "Should I really go on and leave Rook and the girls here?" and "Can I ignore Hugo while he's in such an unsteady state?"

"It's quite obvious that this is the friend who fought at your side yesterday," he continued. He looked directly at me. "I understand that you're wondering why he's taking part in this, and I can tell that you want to talk to him. And it's exactly *because* I can see all that that I'm saying that you should go on ahead. If you don't make it in time, you

would surely regret it forever. That's why I'm suggesting that you go after Franklin."

"...Thanks, Rook... I leave him to you," I said.

"You can count on me!" he replied as I grabbed hold of Silver's reins and turned to the gate.

While facing the frozen hell before me, I was a bit concerned that I'd get frozen like the rest, but upon entering it, I realized that my worries were needless, for it didn't even make me feel the least bit cold.

And so, I rode Silver towards the gate, but then...

...Hugo's robot moved to block my path.

"Hugo," I said.

"...Ray," he spoke through the speakers with a voice bearing no certainty, as though he was wringing it out after having hesitated a lot.

Following a short silence, during which he was likely thinking about whether he should say it or not, Hugo continued his words.

"I'm sorry to fall back on my word... but could you fight me? Just one exchange of all-out attacks will do."

I didn't know what was going on in his mind, and I couldn't tell why he'd decided to say that, but it didn't take long for me to give my answer.

"All right." I nodded as I brandished Nemesis in her black greatsword form. "I have many questions to ask and lots of things to say to you, but for now, I'll leave it at just one attack each."

"...Merci," he said as I and his robot stood to face each other.

There was about 15 meters between us. With me being saddled on Silver and Hugo riding his Magingear, that distance might as well have not been there.

I instantly began charging towards him, trying to get past his Magingear's right side.

"Motor Slash!" shouted the voice from the speakers as the robot swung its right cross-blade towards me with all the speed it could muster.

Magingear were said to be Demi-Dragon-tier, and that was an attack bearing the mecha's whole weight and power. It menaced me more than the Demi-Dragon Worm's charge, and I could tell that it would easily split me in half if it landed.

"Counter Absorption!" Nemesis exclaimed, preventing that from happening with her barrier of light.

"Vengeance is Mine!" I added, following it up with a counterattack from my blade. That shattered the Magingear's frozen armor and bent its inner frame.

And with that single exchange of blows, the battle was over and

we had switched positions.

With my back turned to him, I charged towards the outside of the gate, entrusting my friend... to another friend.



Triangle of Wisdom member, High Pilot, Hugo Lesseps

After our momentary battle, I watched as Ray headed out through the gate.

The battle had ended with Ray remaining unharmed and my Marshall II R's right arm being significantly damaged. If that was all that had to be considered, it would've been my loss. However, I'd just taken something important from him...

"So he used it..." I muttered.

Counter Absorption.

It was a defensive skill unique to Nemesis. Though immensely powerful, Ray had told me that it had a stock of uses. If it had run out during his battle against Gouz-Maise, the amount he'd restocked by now was one. And I'd made him use it on me.

To Ray, who was about to fight "him," it was a shackle he couldn't ignore. I'd asked Ray to go all-out because I'd believed he would do exactly that.

What I'd done just now was nothing but betrayal of a friend who — if only for a day — had fought at my side. I'd sent him to certain death and even cut his sole lifeline.

Though it was a bitter choice for me to make, I had done it regardless.

After all, I didn't want to simply let "his" enemy through.

I hadn't been able to stay out of it with Ray heading there with a do-or-die spirit and endless resolve. It was something I'd done because I'd tried to shoulder everything — my emotions, my sins, and my role as an accomplice.

Oh... seriously... why am I so...?

"For you, that was... Nh?!" Cyco spoke up, but before she could finish, a sudden impact cut her words short.

It was caused by a charge attack from the Tri-Horn Demi-Dragon and additional attacks from the Master riding it — Ray's friend.

"Do excuse me," he said. "You happened to be full of openings."

As I tried to fix my frame's posture, the Master, his Tri-Horn, and the succubus — presumably his Embryo — continued the barrage. There was no hesitation or mercy in his attacks, making it evident that he would've ended it with this sole surprise attack if I'd allowed it.

"You're so unfaaair," said Cyco.

"Now *that* is uncalled for," he replied. "I already said that I'd be the one fighting you. It's not my fault that you got lost in thought."

“Heh heh,” I chuckled. “For someone who appears to be Ray’s friend, you’re certainly different from him.”

While Ray was somewhat irrational, tactless, and single-faced, this guy here was logical and calculating to the core.

The expression he was giving me was nothing like the one he’d given Ray. It was cold, and the lack of even a hint of a smile, combined with his well-structured face, made it somewhat frightening.

I felt like he was fine-tuning the impression he gave to other people, much like I did when playing the role of a knight. However, his mask seemed to be far thicker than mine.

“Perhaps,” he said. “That might be why I respect Ray so much. Ah, that aside...”

Still sitting on the back of the Demi-Dragon, the Master, Rook, looked at me with some of the coldest eyes I’d ever seen... much like the ones my sister had had on that fateful day.

“...I think I hate you,” he continued, his words puzzling me to no end.

Sound Collection then picked up the succubus — likely his Embryo — muttering, “That’s the first time Rook’s ever said that to someone.”

“...Heh,” I chuckled. “Hated on the first encounter. Now that’s something.”

“Perhaps it is,” he replied. “But you’re simply loathsome. You’re so indecisive and uppity that you remind me of *a certain someone*.”

“Incomprehensible nonsense...”

“Is it really?” His gaze had enough power to make me know that he was absolutely sure about something. It felt as though he was aware that I’d averted my eyes to many things and couldn’t be definite about anything.

“...I have no idea what you mean,” I said. “Regardless, I’ll have you freeze where you stand.”

I fixed my mech’s posture, bashed the Tri-Horn away with my armor, and made some distance between us.

“I cannot allow any Masters besides ‘him’ and Ray to pass here,” I continued. “As a member of the Triangle of Wisdom and as a thorn protecting him... I shall give my all to this battle.”

“Very well,” he replied. “Then I will use everything I have to defeat you and pass through. I’ll do this as Ray’s friend... and as myself.”

Standing on the Demi-Dragon with the succubus at his side, he faced me.

After a momentary silence and an exchange of glares, I finally spoke up. “High Pilot: Hugo Lesseps, and Embryo: Cocytus.”

This was a ritual. I would defeat Ray's friend and prevent him from attaining his goal. This was a ritual for that purpose... and a "duel."

"Pimp: Rook Holmes, Embryo: Babylon, and minions: Marilyn and Audrey." He responded in the same way.

"May the fight..." I said before taking a breath.

"...begin!" we both declared.

The duel had begun.

Chapter Six: The Duel in the Frozen Hell

Past, Lucius Holmes

I was born in the United Kingdom. London, to be precise. I was born into a household that was neither wealthy nor noble nor poor. It wasn't all that special in terms of social status. But it certainly wasn't normal, either.

My father was a detective running an agency focused on solving unresolved cases, while my mother was a thief who specialized in stealing works of art.

Indeed — I was the son of a thief and a detective. Though it sounded like the premise to a joke, it was nothing but the truth.

My father was much like a protagonist of a mystery novel, solving many cases no one else could, while my mother was a movie-like secretive robber who traveled the world and stole things of great value. Both of their families had been doing those things for several generations.

I'd even been told that my father's side had taken the surname "Holmes" because his great-grandfather had changed it when starting his detective work, basing it on the most famous detective in the world. It didn't seem to have mattered to him that it was a work of fiction.

How my parents had met, gotten married, and made a son was a mystery for the ages.

I'd once asked my father why he wasn't arresting my mother. He had replied, "A detective's job is to uncover the truth, not to catch criminals." I'd found that questionable, to say the least.

The curiosities didn't end there, either, for my mother was a thief who always returned the works she'd stolen after a couple of weeks of enjoying them. In fact, most of the time, she stole objects that the owners had acquired by illegal means, and handed them over to the police.

Apparently, her goal wasn't money, but the very process of thievery. "A thief's job is to steal, not to sell," she once told me.

To be honest, I wasn't quite sure if "thief" counted as a "job."

Anyway, both of them loved their trades and always gave their all to them, leaving little time for us to spend as a family. Still, exactly *because* they were so focused on using their talents to do what they so

loved, they had been quick to notice a certain thing about me when I was young.

Lucius is extremely gifted.

Insight, observational ability, imagination, dexterity, reflexes, appearance... I'd inherited the talents from both my parents and had even more potential on those fronts than either of them, giving me the makings of both a detective and a master thief. Naturally, my parents had been extremely pleased with that.

With both of them being so passionate about their family business, the two of them thought the same thing:

This talent must not be wasted. I want to nurture him into a great detective/thief, but I can't ignore my beloved's wishes, either.

Thus, they came to a certain agreement.

They would take turns giving me their special education.

My father would train my observational abilities, teach me lip-reading, world languages, and the workings of the human mind, while my mother would instruct me in trap disarmament, finding people's blind spots, and the means of charming and manipulating people.

When I was young, it was set in stone that they would be training my mind and body based on this plan. But neither of them ever ordered me to become a detective or a master thief. Instead, they continually emphasized that they would nurture my talents, and leave me to decide what life I would lead.

A part of me thought that acquiring such a specific set of skills would limit my choices to either detective or thief, but I wasn't unsatisfied with that.

As I got older and began to reflect upon my life so far, I started to realize that limitations like that were only natural when a person had trained in such things for as long as they could remember, because experiences like that were what became the basis of self.

My education had included common sense and sociology, through which I'd discovered that my standards and values were wildly different from those society considered "universal."

Knowing that my situation wasn't the least bit normal, I finally concluded that "It's normal in *my* family, and when talking to those with different standards, I should simply adjust accordingly," which I felt was a thought that truly highlighted the fact that I was my parents' son.

Anyway, after ten years of their special education, by the time I was fifteen years of age, I had acquired almost all of the skills my parents had. I hadn't neglected self-study, either, so I was confident that my total abilities had already exceeded theirs.

Then, when I was just a few years away from becoming an adult and starting to think about what kind of future I'd choose, something

happened.

My parents died in a plane accident.

While they were out on a trip together — which was rare for them — their plane crashed. I was contacted about it shortly afterward.

Though I grieved their deaths, a part of me wondered if that would've truly been enough to kill them. It wasn't a denial of reality — I just reasonably assumed that their skills and experience would have allowed them to survive a normal plane crash.

The day afterward, the news showed that several children wearing parachutes and life jackets had been found in the middle of the sea. They had all come from the same plane that had killed my parents. When the media asked them about their experience, the children said, "A tall man and a pretty lady put parachutes on us."

With that, everything made sense. Apparently, rather than focusing on their own survival, my parents had chosen to bet on the possibility of saving the children.

As a fresh orphan, I wished they had considered me and prioritized their own survival, but at the same time, a great sense of pride filled my chest. I felt nothing but respect for what they'd done. Though, for reasons unknown, tears were running down my face.

Following their death, I got everything in order and took a break from life's stresses.

My parents had already taught me how to go through such formalities, so I was able to inherit their land, house, and money without much trouble. With all I had, I could easily live out the rest of my life with no inconveniences to speak of.

However, I couldn't just do nothing, so I... I...

"...Ah."

That was when I realized that *I didn't have a vision of my own future.*

Silly as it was, despite the fact that I was a genius who'd learned everything my parents could teach me, I didn't notice that until that very moment.

With all the love they'd given me, I'd been comfortable in a life comprised of nothing but honing the skills my parents had bestowed upon me, and thus I'd ended up a person who hadn't made a single decision in his entire life. I'd followed the road my parents had prepared for me and lived doing very little besides clearing the challenges they'd presented me with, and so I had next to no experience in choosing how I wished to live. That was something that I'd left for "someday," rather than "today."

I could vaguely picture the future me making such a choice, but the present me simply didn't have the guidelines for it. Surrounded by my parents' love, I'd led a passive life where I couldn't even shape an

image of the person I wished to be.

“Just how should I live?” I asked myself, feeling as though I’d been thrown into an empty wasteland.

It was as if I had water, food, a compass, the knowledge and the ability to survive, but I didn’t have the slightest clue as to my destination. Regardless of whether I went north, east, south, or west, I had no idea what awaited me, and even if I found something, I wouldn’t know what to do with it. I was completely lost, but no amount of thinking brought me closer to a choice.

Well, this is bad, I thought. If I didn’t mend that, I might end up a person who did *nothing* but live.

Wholly puzzled, I began considering what I should do.

First, I decided check whether or not my parents had left me a message or something in their rooms. A little voice in my head scolded me for searching for my own destination by going through my late parents’ things, but I chose to ignore it.

I started by searching my mother’s room.

It held a trap that, once activated, would burn down the whole room and any potential evidence it could’ve had. I was able to disarm it, but I couldn’t help giving a passing thought to the fact that things could’ve ended badly if this house had been given to someone else.

The only notable thing in my mother’s room was her work equipment. There were no stolen works of art. With it being a room that could burn down, I hadn’t really been expecting any, and a glance at her diary made it obvious that she hadn’t had anything she hadn’t yet returned. I was thankful for that, since I would’ve had to be the one to bring back whatever she’d stolen. Still, a part of me would’ve liked to have a new goal, however meager.

Aside from her work equipment, the only thing of note was an incomplete hand-knit sweater.

I moved on to my father’s room.

Unlike with mother’s room, there were no traps to speak of, and I could easily get in with just a key.

Of course, it’s probably not normal to expect traps in situations like this, I thought to myself.

Upon entering, I instantly noticed something. On father’s work desk, there was an unfamiliar object — a headgear-type piece of electronic equipment.

“Isn’t this for *Infinite Dendrogram*?” I muttered.

The game was part of general knowledge at this point, so I was aware of its existence. It was well-known as a dive-type VRMMO that had gained popularity all across the world. I’d always been busy with my training and studies, so I hadn’t had time for games, nor was I particularly interested in them. At most, my father and I had played

the occasional match of chess.

“Was Father playing it?” I murmured.

He’d been extremely busy with his detective work and my training, so I found it strange that he’d had any time for it.

After leaving the device where it was, I began looking around and found a single letter in one of his drawers.

At first, I thought that it was his will or something, but I quickly realized that it was a letter he’d received from someone. I considered not reading it at first, but a glimpse at the content had me notice the words *Infinite Dendrogram*, so I let my curiosity get the better of me.

Apparently, my father had accepted an anonymous request related to the game.

The sender had asked him to uncover its secrets. They believed that *Infinite Dendrogram* was part of some conspiracy, and had offered my father great amounts of money for a thorough investigation.

Much later, when I looked through the mail, I came across another letter which seemed to be from the same sender. It was condolences regarding his death and a withdrawal of the request, but not of the advance payment. Apparently, the sender was a person of integrity.

Anyway, I was standing before the *Infinite Dendrogram* game machine left behind by my father. It was a game that someone had asked him, a famous detective, to investigate. Naturally, I was interested, but more than that, I felt a strong desire to “choose.”

Having lost sight of where to go, I felt as though it could open up a new path for me.

“If I recall correctly, this game’s promotional line is...”

Infinite Dendrogram will provide you with a new world and your very own unique possibility.

I felt as if it was directed at me.

No other words could intrigue a person who’d lost sight of where to go as much as those. And right now, at this moment, that person was me.

“Very well, provide me with that, then.”

Present me your new world.

“I hope you can point me to it.”

To my possibility.

“Let’s go,” I said as I put on the headgear in my father’s study and entered the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*.



Duel city Gideon, western gate, Pimp, Rook Holmes

“Motor Slash!”

“MHOOOOOOOOOOO!”

The frozen Magingear's pilot used its left arm to launch the same skill as before, to which Marilyn responded with the physical attack called "Tri-Horn Upper."

Next, he will quickly draw out and fire that large gun, so... Babi, Little Flare, I thought.

"Okaaay!" she replied.

"Ah!" the pilot exclaimed in surprise as the low-rank fire spell that Babi had gotten through Drain Learning hit the projectile right before it escaped the gun. The resulting explosion destroyed the muzzle, rendering it impossible for him to use the weapon again.

Next, he will stomp with his right leg and slash upwards with the left blade, so...

"(Liz, move,)" I said, not with audible words, but with slight vibrations in my throat. Since she was in direct contact with my whole body, Liz could feel them going through my skeletal frame, allowing us to communicate without me even having to speak.

Of course, Babi had her beaten on this front, since I could coordinate with her just by thinking.

"...!"

I heard the pilot express his surprise again as I dodged his blade with a backwards jump.

I was able to do that thanks to Liz smoothly extending herself to my heels while making sure that he couldn't see it, and then hitting the ground in a way that made the impact take me backwards. With that, I was now at a distance at which he couldn't hit me again.

An opening at the back right. Two seconds long.

"Marilyn, attack," I ordered.

"MHOOOOOOOO!"

"Mrrgh... So annoying," his Embryo complained as the Magingear turned around and used both blades to stop Marilyn's charge right before she hit. She didn't build up all that much speed to begin with, so the damage wasn't significant.

"This sure is difficult to deal with," said the pilot. "It's as though you're foreseeing our every move... No, you *are*, aren't you?"

Indeed I am, I thought.

Magingear were humanoid and mechanical, so their operative range was easier to grasp than that of humans or other living creatures. I could predict the Magingear's movements even better than I'd been able to predict Audrey's during our aerial battle.

This technique was called "movement observation," and I'd learned it from either my mother or father. I wasn't certain which.

"Yes," I said. "After all, unlike speed-focused Superior Jobs, you don't fight at supersonic speeds or outright disappear from vision."

"Heh," he chuckled. "You talk as though you've fought a Superior

Job before.”

I did, I thought. I lost ten times in a row, though.

Still, fighting her, a person moving at speeds impossible in our world’s framework, had increased the precision of my movement observation.

“So if things go on like this, we will be at a disadvantage...” the pilot said.

“Yes.” I nodded. “It’s true that your Magingear has great stats, and the enhance skill that you High Pilots surely have makes them even greater. However, in the end, it’s still merely a slightly improved Demi-Dragon-class entity.”

In other words, Marilyn, who was a Demi-Dragon, could provide a decent challenge to it. The openings her crash attacks created could then be targeted by Babi, who could use the many skills she’d acquired through Drain Learning during the recent hunt.

Though the skills she’d gained were only those of the low-level monsters we could handle, the number she’d amassed easily surpassed fifty. On that front, she was above even Superior Jobs like Marie.

As for me... Since my opponent was inside the Magingear, Charm was rendered useless, so I could only be a target for him to focus on. Still, evading his attacks left him open to ours, and no matter how many of them I avoided, he would still go for me. After all, Babi was my Embryo and Marilyn was my minion, so it would all end if I fell.

My whole body was like a weak spot for us, which was why I had Liz focusing on assisting my evasive maneuvers rather than attacking.

We also did it in a manner that didn’t give it away, since I had a certain play in mind.

“So, at this rate, we will use up all our energy...” the pilot muttered.

Though the Magingear had higher stats than any of us, my movement observation and our powers combined made it entirely possible for us to come out on top. However...

“But I do wonder how long you can stay unfrozen while La Porte de l’Enfer is active,” he added, pointing out the greatest problem on my end. My left hand was already Frozen from the elbow down.

I had no doubt that it was the same attack he’d used on the more experienced Masters around us, turning them into the ice statues they now were. Then there was the fact that I’d had to return Audrey into the Jewel right after taking her out because she’d had half of her body completely Frozen.

The amount of ice on me was slowly increasing, making it obvious that I would eventually become like the other Masters here. Rather than increasing continually, it seemed to increase at regular intervals, somewhere between a few ten to a hundred or so seconds.

First, it had covered my hand and a bit of my wrist; then it had covered most of my forearm; now it extended to my elbow. Though the amount I Froze each time was about the same, the intervals were all over the place. The second time had come 39 seconds after the initial freeze, while the third had happened 130 seconds after the second.

The greatest common divisor for those numbers was 13, so it might have been related to the Embryo's name and the skill's name: "Cocytus" and "the gate of hell."

"What does it mean?" asked Babi telepathically.

Well, Babi, I thought in response, In Dante's Divine Comedy, Cocytus is the name of the Ninth Circle of Hell, which is the frozen hell where the treacherous go. It's where Christ's thirteenth apostle and the greatest traitor in Christianity, Judas, gets his punishment. Some suggest that during the Last Supper, before betraying Christ, he sat in the thirteenth chair. And there's also the fact that thirteen is considered to be an ominous number in Christianity.

"Ohh, so she is an ominous Embryo, right?" said Babi.

For me, at the very least.

If things continued as they had been, I had a high chance of winning, but if I Froze before that happened, I would become unable to arrive at that result. Therefore, I had to use one of the aces up my sleeve, but I couldn't ignore his La Porte de l'Enfer. After all, there was no guarantee that using it wouldn't cause me to become a Frozen statue, just like the rest of the Masters here.

Thus, I began by solving the mystery behind it.

"(Liz, I need a moment to focus on thinking, so you prioritize evasion and defense. As long as you make sure that he doesn't see you, I can leave it all to you.)"

A moment later, my body began being swayed around as Liz, my coat, started moving on her own will. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it didn't hinder my thought processes.

And so, I began thinking.

I looked around with my erratic vision, and the thing that stood out the most was the pallid ice trapping each of the Masters.

The one thing about the ice statues that really caught my eye were their still faces. Based on their expressions, I could tell that they'd gotten Frozen before they'd even realized it. As in, their whole bodies had been Frozen right from the start. From that, I could conclude that there were four... no, three ways this skill affected its targets.

First, there was the way experienced by me and Audrey: those who got Frozen partially and had it grow over time.

Then there were the ice statues around us: those who got completely Frozen in an instant.

And finally, there were Babi and Marilyn: those who didn't get Frozen at all.

The targets and the skill's effects on them were based on some criteria, and until I knew what it was, I couldn't use my trump card due to the risk of it causing me to turn into an ice statue.

Does it Freeze everyone except for the ones chosen by him? I wondered.

Negative. If that were the case, then Babi, Marilyn, and Liz would've gotten frozen, as well.

Does it Freeze only humans?

Negative. Audrey had been affected, as well.

Perhaps the amount Frozen is proportional to level and stats?

Negative. That wouldn't explain the difference in effect between Marilyn and Audrey, who were just about equal in that regard.

Maybe it's just random?

Negative. That simply wasn't the case, since a luck-based skill wasn't reliable enough to be used in holding important locations or fighting many strong individuals.

There was definitely a certain degree of rule and regularity to it.

"Oaaaaghh!" the pilot roared and made his Magingear slip by Marilyn and Babi, charging at me with its right blade held high, ready for a downwards swing.

"Oh?" I said.

Well, he's closing in on me, I thought. I won't really be able to read his movements completely until I uncover the secret behind his skill, so...

Liz seemed to have decided to try and bear the attack by enhancing the part of the coat it would hit, and according to my calculations based on the estimated damage, Liz's defenses, my own HP and END, I had a 70% chance of dying. There was nothing I could really do during the two seconds before the blade would hit me.

So I'll spend those two seconds thinking and getting the answers I need to know so that I can attain victory when I survive.

"M..." he began shouting his skill as I changed my approach to the mystery I was solving.

Embryo names and their skills weren't unrelated.

For example, Ray's Nemesis was based on a goddess of retribution and was focused on counterattacks, while Marie's Arc-en-Ciel — rainbow — launched bullets of several different colors.

"...O..."

So, I focused on the name of his Embryo — Cocytus.

In Greek myth, it was the river of lament, while in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, it was the lowest Circle of Hell, the frozen lake.

"...t..."

From the current situation and the name of the skill — "gate of

hell” — I could infer that it was based on the latter.

Cocytus was the hell meant for those who had committed treachery, considered to be the greatest sin of all. There, Satan, frozen up to his waist, was continuously gnawing at Judas and other traitors.

It was obvious by now that the name was related to the 13 second counter and the frost, but I felt like there was more to it.

“...O...”

For example, it was possible that the skill had a greater effect on traitors. It would explain why Audrey, who had originally been Gardranda’s mount, had been affected the most, and... No, that couldn’t be it. After all, it was highly unlikely that the Frozen Masters here were all traitors that could make Judas proud.

“...r...”

Then perhaps, like most hells, it is based on some sort of karma system?

I didn’t see it in any of the informational windows, but there could be some sort of hidden stat which recorded the vile deeds done and... no, that couldn’t be it, either. The difference in damage just wouldn’t make sense if that were the case. Just like with treachery, it was hard to believe that each and every Master here had had enough negative karma to Freeze in only an instant.

“...S...”

I can’t quite put my finger on it, I thought. What makes it a hell and what does it count as “betrayal”?

It would be far easier if there were some sort of record that displayed treachery as a concrete number, and...

...Hm? A concrete number?

“...l...”

I was actually aware of something that fit the criteria. It could easily be interpreted as treachery *and* could be linked to the difference in effect between the entities here.

“...a...”

I had found my answer. *This number* was the secret behind his skill, and its greatness was what determined its power.

For Babi and Marilyn, the number was 0. I’d gotten some just a short while ago. Audrey had gotten several dozens during yesterday’s hunt. And the experienced Masters who had Gideon as their main haunt had it far above 100.

“...sh...!”

Indeed, the number that La Porte de l’Enfer was based on was—

Two seconds had passed. Just as I’d expected, the Motor Slash he’d launched landed directly on me.

As some of my silver hair got scattered into the wind, I was blasted away straight into Gideon’s outer wall.



These were the memories of a not-so-distant past.

Upon logging in to *Infinite Dendrogram* using the headgear in my father's study, strangely enough, I found myself in another study, this one significantly more old-fashioned.

"Hellooo and welcommme!" In the study, there was a talking cat.

"I am the control AI called 'Cheshiire,'" it said. "What's wrooong?"

As I stared at the feline creature, I felt something really odd.

Due to the special education I'd gotten, I saw the world in a manner different than any normal person or even my parents, the ones who'd taught me. By simply observing people, I could uncover the truths about their personalities or see what they were hiding behind their spoken words, allowing me to more or less guess what they were thinking.

With those I was familiar with, my mind-reading success rates were as high as 99%. That number wasn't nearly as great with people and animals I'd just met, but I could still make a decent guess as to what they were thinking or feeling.

However, the creature before me — Cheshire — was completely unreadable to me. I'd felt as if it didn't even fit the categories of "feline," "human" or even "living being." It felt like I was looking at something beyond human comprehension merely pretending to be a cat.

"Well... perhaps this is normal for control AIs...?" I muttered.

"Umm... Is anything the matter?" asked Cheshire.

"Oh, it's nothing. My name is Lucius Holmes. A pleasure to meet you."

Thus began my tutorial.

Soon enough, we got to the character creation stage.

"Will you keep your name as 'Lucius Holmes'?" asked the cat.

"Can't I?" I replied with a question.

"You can, but it's not recommennnded."

As I began thinking of another name, I noticed something that was in the study.

It was a chessboard. The pieces on it were placed in a way that made it seem as though the players had disappeared in the middle of the game, and one piece — a rook — had the enemy king placed in check.

"I will be 'Rook Holmes,'" I said. I had good memories of playing chess with my father, so it felt somewhat... right to base my name on something from the game.

"Very welll. Now, for the appearaaance," said the cat.

I didn't make any notable changes in that regard. I'd spent many

years training to move and act with my own body, so I kept it the same to prevent any potential feelings of malaise. The only thing I changed was the hair color. Instead of keeping the blond I'd inherited from my father, I made it a silver just like my mother's.

Thus, I began the game.

At the end of the tutorial, Cheshire told me that I was free to do whatever I chose to in this world. I could uncover the truths about it, steal its secrets, simply play it, or perhaps even live in it. To my mind, it seemed like good practice at choosing what kind of life I wished to lead.

On my first day in *Infinite Dendrogram*, the Embryo implanted in my left arm hatched, creating Babi.

"Hellooo! Let's get along, Rook!" She had been exactly the same back then as she was now.

I couldn't help but wonder why *she* had been the one born as my Embryo. Cheshire had told me that it would be created and evolve based on my own personality and experiences. I was curious as to why those things had resulted in Babi, and that was a question which I had yet to answer.

On my second day in *Infinite Dendrogram*, I'd realized that, despite not having any relevant skills, I could use the techniques I'd acquired in reality without any problem whatsoever. This world had sense skills such as "Mental Analysis," but I felt that they were weaker than the same abilities of those who'd brought them over from reality.

Anyway, unlike in on-screen games, *Infinite Dendrogram* had avatars to which I could apply my techniques and analyze the people controlling them.

In real life, I'd used this ability to examine the true faces of those I was talking to and determine whether they were worthy of trust. People's minds were different from the expressions they showed. It was especially common to find those who seemed to be cheerful, but were actually gloomy at heart. This was something I'd taken for granted, as it was only a natural part of the human condition.

And that was exactly why my first meeting with Ray greatly surprised me.

After all, *there was no difference between what he appeared to be and what he really was.*

Not even his Nemesis surprised me as much as he himself did.

What made his existence a true enigma was the fact that his *Infinite Dendrogram* avatar seemed to be no different from him as a player.

This world was presented as a game, so differences between the players and the roles they took in their avatars was a given. But Ray showed no signs of showing off, playing some character, or hiding

some complex he had in reality.

At first, I thought that *Infinite Dendrogram* had reduced the effectiveness of my people-observation abilities, so I'd made it my first goal to uncover the mysteries behind him, and I'd reached my conclusion far quicker than expected.

I'd talked to him, met with him again, fought at his side as we'd faced the likes of the Goblin horde and Gardranda, and that had been more than enough for me to know that Ray was simply *himself* — an honest person with no fronts to speak of. In his heart of hearts, he saw no difference between the two worlds.

The determination he'd displayed during the battle against the Goblins or Gardranda, the grief in his eyes when he'd talked about the children lost during his battle against the Gouz-Maise Gang, and the anger he was currently feeling towards Franklin were all very real.

Ray wasn't roleplaying a character called "Ray Starling" — he stood in this world as none other than himself, and put his very being into his existence here.

He could instantly choose what he had to do in any particular place and time, and he always gave his utmost to achieve his goals, regardless of what hardships awaited him and no matter how low the possibility of success was.

Ray *lived* genuinely and earnestly.

Unlike me, who was always indecisive, he always had his heart provide an answer for which he would give his all.

"I mean, it would leave a bad taste in my mouth."

Ray was a person who constantly chose actions he wouldn't regret and always acted in earnest to achieve them, and that was exactly why I wished to support him. I was a person who couldn't even choose his own path in life, but seeing Ray and the honesty he displayed when giving his all to face the challenges before him made me want to help him.

For his sake and by his side, I wished to fight in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

Therefore...



"...I will defeat you, here and now," I declared as my momentary flashback ended and I stood up from the outer wall's rubble, facing the Magingear piloted by Hugo Lesseps and his Embryo, Cocytus.

"For a Pimp, you sure are tough," he said. "I didn't expect you to be able to stand after that attack."

I couldn't agree more. I'd calculated my probability of survival at about 30%, but even I was surprised at how little damage the attack had done to me.

The most likely cause of this was the Magingear's right arm. Just by looking at it, I could tell that the frame under its icy armor was bent.

It had been caused by Ray's Vengeance is Mine, and its effect on the arm had greatly lowered the damage I'd received in this attack.

"I can't lose here," I said.

"Heh," he chuckled. "Don't expect to be so lucky with my next attack. Also..."

I knew exactly what he was going to say. The ice on me had already reached the top of my shoulder.

The fact the attack hadn't shattered my arm was quite a stroke of luck.

"...La Porte de l'Enfer continues to consume you," he continued.

"True," I replied. "You might say that your skill has me in *check*."

I momentarily fell silent, regained my breath and spoke up again.

"After all... I defeated several humans in the plaza battle against the player killers."

That was part of the conclusion I'd reached.

"...What is that supposed to mean?" he asked, and the momentary pause before his reply was all the confirmation I needed.

"That's what this skill is based on, right?" I asked.

Even more confirmation couldn't hurt, so I opened my menu — making sure that Hugo could see it — and looked at the window where the core of the skill known as "La Porte de l'Enfer" lay.

"Battle history window, extras section, creature type kill counters," I continued. "La Porte de l'Enfer's effects are based on 'the kill count for the same type of creatures as yourself,' correct?"

Creature type kill counters kept a record of the total number of kills of separate creature types, such as undead, beast, avian, dragon, devil, elemental, demon... or human.

"The 'betrayal' that Cocytus looks at is the kill count for creatures of your own type, and it's what dictates the extent of your La Porte de l'Enfer's powers," I went on.

He said nothing.

"The number of 'humans' I've killed is 7. What a coincidence... my body seems to be Freezing about 7% at a time."

I also had access to Audrey's kill counts. Her type was "avian," and she'd killed a significant number of such creatures during yesterday's hunt. The exact number was 58, so it made perfect sense that the skill had Frozen over half of her body.

We'd had yet to fight any devils or dragons, so Babi and Marilyn's counters were at 0, which explained why they hadn't Frozen at all.

And, of course...

...it includes the kills made within the barriers of duel cities such as

this one, I thought. *Those who frequent this city have probably killed hundreds of people.*

Experienced Masters gathering in duel city Gideon had likely spent a lot of time in the arenas, and even if it had happened within barriers, they'd probably killed a number of humans that surpassed 100.

"To add to this, the number is also applied to the chance of it happening every 13 seconds, yes?" I asked.

Sometimes, I got away without Freezing, while the other Masters had all completely Frozen right at the start.

"The description for La Porte de l'Enfer is 'Gives an X% chance to Freeze X% of the selected target's body every 13 seconds. X is the number on the target's kill counter for the same creature type as the target.' Am I correct?"

That meant I had a 7% chance to Freeze 7% of my body every 13 seconds, while those with 100 on the counter had a 100% chance to Freeze completely. The skill also ignored resistances to some extent, seeing as it was unlikely that every single Master here didn't have anything that lowered the effects of the Frozen debuff.

"This skill is the reason why you're standing guard here," I continued. "Most of the kingdom's Masters in duel city Gideon are here for the arenas, so your skill is nothing but their bane. It makes sense to have you block the escape route."

Those who'd fought against many of their kind and become powerful in the process would have that experience work against them. Any and all traitors, killers of their own kin, would be encased in the ice of the frozen hell.

"An interesting guess, but it's based on nothing but circumstantial evidence," he said. "To me, it looks like your conditions merely happened to meet the result."

"Ha ha ha," I laughed. "Your tone just now confirmed that I'm right. You're bad at lying and fooling people, aren't you?"

I could tell without even seeing his face.

"And that's why I hate you," I added.

"That's not the first time you've said that," he replied. "If I may ask, what do you mean by 'and that's why'? Do you like people who are good at lying?"

His words made me heave a long sigh.

He still doesn't get it, I thought. *...No, he probably does.*

"I certainly don't like people who can lie well... but I hate those who make their inner doubts and dishonesties so obvious," I answered.

"...What?"

Well, now, should I say it? If I provoke him too much, the time might...

You know, I'll just make it a bit harsh and relatively long. He's probably the type to get mad after hearing people out.

"You're like Ray, aren't you?" I asked. "As in, one of those who sees this world as a world, rather than as a game, yes?" I said.

"Despite that, your actions are just so... so irritating."

"Irritating?" he repeated.

I gathered the slight bit of depression he made me feel and put it into words.

"It irritates me how you've taken up a role in Franklin's game and become complicit in this tragedy, yet you talk and behave in a way that reeks of excuses like 'I must' or 'There's no other way.' It irritates me how you spin your reasoning to try and justify your actions, yet you give it a preface of 'Oh I'm so terrible,' basically making excuses for your excuses. Then there's your exchange with Ray. It irritates me how you, with all your indecisiveness, have the gall to stand in his way. It irritates me how even *you* felt guilt after doing it, yet you just took to thinking something like 'Another sin for my scroll,' basically wallowing in your own guilt. Speaking of wallowing, it irritates me how you're so full of yourself that you talk with that theatrical elocution. Truly, you're irritating beyond words."

As I went on, I realized that I was even more vexed than I'd thought. Still, my volubility took over, and I simply couldn't stop.

"Oh, and I'm irritated by the church-like design!" added Babi. "We're just so *done* with you!"

"Y-You...!" he said with anger.

"K-Kill..." his Embryo joined.

I see... "done," eh? I thought. I guess that's about enough, then. Now, for the finishing touches.

"Good grief... You're full of doubts about where to turn, you can't be honest with yourself, you wallow in the tragedy you willingly participate in... You're so much like an even worse version of *a certain someone* that I can't help but find you irritating and loathsome."

As a conclusion to this, I only had one more thing to say to him... no — "her."

"Stop wallowing in so much doubt and angst... *young lady*."

"Kh...!" My words provoked an outburst from the pallid Magingear.

It charged towards me with all its speed, eager to get me into the range of its blades, and the one in the left hand would probably be used to end me, once and for all.

I had an estimated three seconds before it sunk into my head and split me in half. The power behind it wasn't something Liz's defenses could bear, and it was unlikely that I could evade it. However, there was no need for that.

After all, we were already done *charging*.

“Union Jack,” I said, long before my three seconds were up.



Duel city Gideon, not far from the western gate

This took place a short time prior.

Duel city Gideon’s western gate connected it to the field known as “Jeand Grasslands” and was one of the only four exits out of the anti-air barrier shielding the entire city.

Near it, there were dozens of Masters Frozen solid, and they surrounded the battle between the Pimp known as Rook Holmes and the High Pilot calling himself Hugo Lesseps.

However, that wasn’t the only battle going on there.

“Kasumi! Your tank summon is gone!”

“I-I need 55 more seconds until I c-can re-cast it.”

The ones fighting were the three girls that had accompanied Ray and Rook — the newbie Masters known as Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon.

Their opponent was a monster looking much like a carnivorous dinosaur with the name “PBS — Preparative Brute Saurus” hanging above it.

“BGHAAAAAARGHH!” it roared as it charged towards Io with its fangs at the ready.

“Tyranno...saurus?” hesitated Kasumi.

“Looks more like an allosaurus to me,” commented Fujinon.

“Not the right time to say that!” shouted Io. “This thing’s obviously stronger than a Demi-Dragon-class thing! Do something about it!”

“All right. I’ll stop it... Almagest.”

Standing behind Io, Fujinon readied her Embryo, a staff with a spinning orb on its end.

“Mud Clap, then Star Printer, thrice,” she said, using a pair of skills. They caused a magic circle to form at the base of her feet. Then three more magic circles appeared and orbited the center one like satellites.

“Click,” she said, causing one of the orbiting magic circles to vanish.

A moment later, the pavement and ground beneath PBS began moving like mud and grabbed its foot. Due to the might of its charge, it instantly broke the bond, but its momentum caused it to violently crash into the ground.

“Click, Click, Click,” she continued, making the remaining three magic circles vanish.

Three patches of ground around PBS became mud-like and bound it completely.

Fujinon's Embryo, Almagest, was a Type Arms taking the shape of a staff with a star-like sphere at one of its ends. Its unique trait was the copying-and-pasting of the spells she used, allowing her to create up to three copies, represented by orbiting magic circles, and release them at her command.

Its drawback was the fact that Fujinon couldn't move when a satellite magic circle was present, which was a fitting negative for an Embryo bearing the name of the main text behind Ptolemaic theory.

Mud Clap was a low-rank, earth-based binding spell, and though a single one gave little trouble to an enhanced and modified Demi-Dragon-class monster like PBS, a few of them could hold it in place for several seconds.

It was an opening — an opportunity not to be missed.

"Io!" she shouted.

"Okay! I'll tear it apart! Five-Ring, Splitting Mode!"

Following her words, Io charged, holding a huge, one-sided battleax that probably weighed several tons, with a handle over 5 metels in length.

"Here I gooo!" she called, gathering all her strength as she swung her weapon down on the immobilized PBS's medulia.

Like a beast of legend or an executioner from the middle ages, she tore into its neck, broke its cervical vertebrae, sliced through its throat, and even reached the pavement below, shattering a large portion of it.

Though greatly modified, the monster wasn't able to survive without its head. Thus, it simply became particles of light, leaving behind nothing but its drops.

"Io, there's one in the sky behind you!" Kasumi warned her.

"I know! Crushing Mode!" she said as she turned around to look at the pteranodon-like monster trying to surprise attack her using the night's veil as cover.

At the same time, her Embryo, Five-Ring, changed shape. Its handle reduced to about a fifth of its previous size, and the ax head got replaced by a chain at least 20 metels in length, which ended with a spiked ball that surely had more weight than she did.

Io's Embryo, Five-Ring, was a Type Arms that could transform into several ultra-heavy weapons, such as the one-sided battleax from its Splitting Mode or the giant flail from its Crushing Mode.

Like with Ray's Nemesis, the user didn't feel any of the weapons' weight, making the Embryo excel at dealing damage. On the other hand, the weapons still had huge mass, which made them move very slowly and thus have low accuracy.

Io swung the giant flail towards the pteranodon-like monster. It tried to evade it, but it suddenly got caught by something.

“BOBOBOBOBO...”

It was a marshmallow-like balloon giant — a creature many in *Infinite Dendrogram* would recognize as the summoned monster called “Balloon Golem.”

“Hold it in place... Balulun.”

Kasumi was a Summoner — a job focused on using magic to create monsters which help them in their fights.

Balulun was one of the monsters she could summon, and she did so often, as its Physical Resistance and Floating Ability made it a capable tank. Therefore, there was nothing strange about the summoning itself.

What was strange was the fact that Balulun had appeared right behind the pteranodon.

That was done by Kasumi’s Embryo, the Taijitu.

It was a radar-like Type Arms that showed the location of all the Masters in a certain area around it. Its drawback was the fact that it neither had nor provided any abilities that were meant exclusively for battle. However, the Taijitu *did* have something besides its radar function.

It was an ability to teleport any tamed or summoned monsters within Kasumi’s minion capacity to any location on the map. Though greater distances cost her more MP, locations within a 50 meter radius of her weren’t all that draining.

Balulun pushed itself on the pteranodon, rendering it unable to move.

“HIIIIIT!”

Not missing the opportunity, Io threw her flail towards it, pulverizing its bones and tenderizing its flesh.

That single hit was enough to kill the pteranodon. Just like the PBS, it began to turn into particles of light, leaving behind nothing but its drops.

“That’s five!”

“W-We did it...”

Kasumi and Fujinon gave their all into binding and holding the enemies, while Io used her high-rank-tier damage to kill them with a critical hit. This tactic of theirs led them to defeating a total of five Demi-Dragon-class monsters that had gathered near the western gate.

Demi-Dragon-class creatures were said to be equivalent to a party of six low-rank jobs. Of course, Masters had Embryo abilities at their disposal, so it wasn’t always necessary for a party to be full in order to defeat a Demi-Dragon, but no one could deny that their success was an impressive feat. Each of them knew about the extent of each others’ abilities and fought while making up for each others’ flaws in order to achieve victory.

Aside from exceptions like Ray and Rook, among the newbies that had escaped the central arena, these girls had the greatest combined amount of battle potential. If that hadn't been the case, they would never have stood a chance against the modified monsters attacking them.

"Phew," Io sighed. "We can finally catch our breath!"

"N-No, we can't... Rook is still fighting... We have to help..." said Kasumi.

The three had been intending to help Rook fight Hugo right when the battle began, but they'd had to make a change of plans when they'd gotten attacked by the monsters.

"Oh, yeah! How's he holding up?!" cried Kasumi.

"They've stopped and are now talking about something," answered Fujinon. "I can't hear them from here."

"All right! I'll use my Bursting Mode and...!" said Io as she was about to make Five-Ring transform into its third form, but Kasumi and Fujinon quickly stopped her.

"D-Don't..."

"Attacking right now doesn't seem like a good idea. Let's watch and see where this goes... Kasumi, are there any other Masters nearby?"

"N-No..." Kasumi slowly shook her head. "Ray's mark is outside the gates... so he's still alive... Franklin is there, too, though..."

"I see."

"Okay! Then let's go and pick up the drops! Demi-Dragons give lots of stuff!" cried Io before running to take the items around them.

"I-Io... there might be more... so we should be on-guard," Kasumi warned.

"Let's sell it all and split the money equally!" Io cried. "Oh, but I might take the armor the boss boxes give! There isn't much we Barbarian Fighters can equip, you know?"

"Sh-She's not listening..."

Io got absorbed in her looting, while Kasumi looked at her with teary eyes.

Fujinon, on the other hand, noticed something strange. "Drops...? Wait... why are they dropping items? Tamed monsters *aren't supposed to drop anything*, aren't they?"

Her question wasn't without reason, for what was happening right here was simply impossible.

In *Infinite Dendrogram*, the system itself made it so that tamed monsters under someone's command wouldn't drop items.

"Not only that, but the default setting makes it so that tamed monsters return to the jewel before they get fatal damage," she continued. "But even if he changed it, there's still no reason for them

to be dropping items...”

It was evident that the monsters had been made by Franklin and were under his command, which was exactly why they were targeting the kingdom’s Masters.

“But what if they’re not actual tamed monsters and aren’t acting by his orders?” Fujinon said slowly. “What if that directive was imprinted during the creation stages? If that’s the case... If Franklin can do this, then...”

As a conclusion began to form in Fujinon’s mind...

—■■■■!!

An air-rending clash resounded around them, causing the three to turn to its source.

It came from the frozen hell — the area of effect of La Porte de l’Enfer.

Its cause was the impact made by the enraged Magingear using all its power to bring one of its blades down on Rook.

Following the sound, the silver-haired young man, Rook, disappeared from the frozen hell. It wasn’t just him, either, for Babylon and Marilyn, his Embryo and minion, were nowhere in sight.

The three girls thought Rook had been defeated and that his creatures had disappeared with him. But they soon noticed something strange.

“Who is that?” asked Kasumi, momentarily breaking the silence enveloping the surroundings.

Indeed, Rook’s team was nowhere in sight.

Instead, there was just someone *none of them recognized*.



“Wh-What’s going on?” Hugo asked, perplexed more than anyone else witnessing this event.

Enraged by Rook’s words, he’d swung his blade down on him. Then his attack had been stopped.

The unknown person before him used the long weapon in his right hand to stop the superhuman robot’s blade, and that person definitely didn’t look like Rook. He had devilish wings on his back, devilish horns on his head, and draconic scales on his body. In his right hand he held a silver lance, seemingly made out of three bundled dragon horns.

He was a fine figure of a man, looking much the way one would expect the silver-haired pretty boy to look if he aged a bit.

“Who... Who are you?!” asked Hugo.

In response, the creature flashed a grin before answering.

“Union Jack — Dragon-Devil-Man.”

The man closed in on the Magingear and kicked it away. Though

its weight surpassed ten tons, the attack made the machine get blasted a few meters back.

“Kh...!” Hugo quickly recovered from the mental shock and the physical impact before regaining his posture.

A moment later, he noticed the man standing right beside his Magingear with his left hand on the robot’s chest armor piece.

“Little Flare.”

The point-blank fire spell melted the frozen armor as it delivered an impact to the inside of the Magingear.



“That’s the magic skill used by the Embryo!” cried Hugo, and he was completely right. But the draconic, devilish man’s Little Flare was several times more powerful than that of Babi’s.

“Tri-Horn Upper!” the man said as he closed the distance between them and swung the dragon horn lance.

That was another skill Hugo was already familiar with. Though the horns had been replaced by a lance, it was definitely the same move that Marilyn had used during the battle before she vanished.

Hugo tried to deflect it with the right blade, but it wasn’t able to bear the attack and broke off at about the halfway point.

“Th-This is too...!”

A moment later, he activated the Smoke Discharger attached to the Magingear’s thigh part. The area instantly got covered in a sight-obscuring smokescreen, causing the man’s movements to become duller.

“Motor Slash!” said Hugo as he brought his remaining blade down on the man, who evaded it by jumping backwards, clearly aware that it was coming. The manner of movement was one he’d already seen many times during this battle.

“I see,” he said. “So that’s how it is.”

Hugo was now absolutely certain about the nature of his “new” enemy.

“So you’re ‘him,’ aren’t you?” he continued. “Right now, you’re merged with your Embryo and monster. That’s the effect of the skill you used before, isn’t it?”

In response, the man... Rook... merely smiled.

His opponent solved the details of his skill, but there was no need for him to confirm it. Hugo himself had reacted in a similar manner, after all. However, it was undeniable that he was absolutely correct.

Master, Embryo, and monster merging. That was indeed the effect of Union Jack, the skill Babylon had gained upon reaching her third form.

It had been born out of Rook’s admiration for Ray and the way his fighting style focused on combining his powers with those of Nemesis. Though Union Jack wasn’t quite the same as what they did, it wasn’t completely unlike it, either.

The skill combined the stats and skills of three creatures to create a single entity.

In this case, it bore the great stats of the dragon known as “Marilyn,” the many skills of the devil called “Babylon,” and the intelligence of the genius man leading them. Thus, it was labeled “Dragon-Devil-Man,” and it was the strongest ace up Rook’s sleeve.

“Can you really perform such a skill without any preparation?”

added Hugo, and with good reason, too.

Union Jack wasn't the only skill that merged or combined certain entities. However, all of them either needed some time to be charged up before they were ready to use or had the combining process itself take a while. That was the ultimate negative of such skills.

"Skill preparation? But I did do it. And for a while, too," the man purposely answered with words, rather than just a smile.

Noticing that what he'd said had made Hugo subconsciously began rummaging through his memory, the man used the opening to attack him yet again.

"Gh!" Hugo came back to his senses and swung his blade down.

"I can see your movements even better than before," Rook said as he evaded the sword and lunged the lance into one of the robot's leg joints.

The Magingear had high defense in its basic state, and it was increased even further by the frost armor. Due to that, the attack didn't break it completely, but the stats Rook had gained as a result of Union Jack had made him surpass even Marilyn, and the damage done to the armor wasn't something Hugo could just brush off.

"Now, when do you think I started preparing this skill? Take a moment to think on it," Rook said in a gentle voice that contrasted with his vicious attacks.

The correct answer was that Babi had begun charging Union Jack the moment Rook had said "check," and that it was over by the time Babi said "done." It was a code they'd decided on beforehand.

The reason Rook had dedicated time to explaining his theory about Hugo's skill, seemingly neglecting the fact that his body had a higher chance to Freeze the more time had passed, had been both to confirm that he was right and to buy time for Union Jack.

In his mock battle against Marie, he'd prepared this skill during the break between the ninth and tenth battles.

Rook wondered how he'd go about buying the time during an actual battle, but in this one, he had been able to do it thanks to his conversational skills and a bit of planning.

"As you may have noticed already, La Porte de l'Enfer has no effect on me anymore," he added.

Indeed, upon becoming the Dragon-Devil-Man, Rook had been freed from the ice damning his left arm. Not only that, but he didn't show any signs of freezing again.

"Right now, I don't count as human, and I don't believe there's even a kill counter for what I am," he said. "So, La Porte de l'Enfer can't do anything to me."

By merging with a dragon and a devil, Rook had become a chimera, and since he hadn't killed a single one of those, the frozen

hell was nothing more than scenery to him. Rook had escaped La Porte de l'Enfer's judgment by changing his own creature type.

"From here on out... our battle is merely a contest of strength, Hugo Lesseps," he said.

"La Porte de l'Enfer is meaningless, and you have enough power to match me all by your lonesome," said Hugo. "I can see why you call it that. Very well, I'll face you, Rook Holmes."

Rook jumped backwards, creating some distance between them.

It wasn't to escape. Far from it. He needed the distance to get the speed necessary for the activation of the most damaging skill at his disposal: Marilyn's charge attack.

In response, Hugo, Cocytus, and the Magingear got into posture. Unlike before, they weren't going to use a Motor Slash or some firearm attack.

Among her unique skills, Cocytus had only one that did damage directly. It was severely taxing in terms of MP, so Hugo had avoided using it in order to keep La Porte de l'Enfer active. However, as things were, he decided to prioritize preventing the person before him from getting to Franklin alive. He had become absolutely certain that his opponent was too dangerous to be allowed to go and support Ray.

He's too much of a threat, Hugo thought. It's not about his power... He merely sees through people too well to be allowed to see "him." I have to end him, here and now.

What followed next was a deafening silence.

It felt as though the very air that transmitted sound vibrations became Frozen.

The Dragon-Devil-Man and the Magingear faced one another, not moving a muscle or a mechanical joint.

Surrounded by the many ice sculptures, they stood so still that they, too, seemed like pieces of art.

Suddenly, the sound of an explosion from *outside the gate* resounded around them, breaking the silence and the tense air.

The two had no means of knowing what had caused it, nor did they care enough to find out. They merely used the sound as a trigger to begin dashing.

Rook brandished the silver-coated dragon horn lance and sprinted with a posture so low that it seemed like he could scrape the pavement. He used Marilyn's charge attack, which was empowered by both the stats he'd gotten due to the merge and the many passive skills Babi had at her disposal.

The lance's attack was now beyond the realm of Demi-Dragons, and it wouldn't have been far-fetched to say that it could bore a hole in a Pure-Dragon.

Tri-Horn Grand Dash.

The Magingear re-created the left blade it had lost. But unlike before, it wasn't an ice weapon. On the contrary — the distorted air around it made it quite obvious that it was a blade of pure heat.

It was Cocytus's trump card — a skill that took all the heat absorbed by La Porte de l'Enfer and transformed it into offensive energy.

Purgatorial Slash!

And so, the two clashed, finally deciding the victor.



The end of the battle was witnessed by only three people — Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon.

“Ah...”

What they saw after the clash was Rook, lying down on the pavement.

The two's most lethal attacks met, and the Dragon-Devil-Man reached his limit before his lance could completely pierce the Magingear's cockpit. The deadly damage he'd received had caused the transformation to be undone, so Babi and Marilyn were lying nearby.

Rook was wounded all over.

“Looks like... I didn't have the power to win,” he said.

Though many would argue that he'd simply been unlucky. If the Masters defeated by La Porte de l'Enfer hadn't included Bishmal, the kingdom's strongest fire user, the heat absorbed wouldn't have been nearly as great, and the power of the Purgatorial Slash would've been significantly lower.

If that had been the case, Babi's resistances and the Demi-Dragon-surpassing stats would've made it possible for him to bear the attack.

“Mh...” Hugo silently examined the damage on his Magingear, as it certainly hadn't come out unscathed, either. The frozen armor on the front of the machine had shattered, and the armor of the Marshall II R itself was crooked and pierced deep enough to reach the cockpit.

Hugo had seen the tip of the silver lance that had entered his vision. If he'd been just a little bit slower in defeating his opponent, he would've surely gotten the death penalty. However, the Marshall II R was still up and running. If the Magingear Cocytus used as a base was still there, and he could still use La Porte de l'Enfer.

As proof of that, Rook — having returned to being human — was beginning to Freeze again.

“Next... it's those three,” muttered Hugo as he shifted his gaze towards Kasumi, Io, and Fujinon.

That slight action was *the greatest mistake Hugo had made tonight*.

He should've crushed Rook's head before taking time to analyze the situation.

After all, Rook...

"If I don't have the energy to beat him directly, I'd like you to open the hatch... *Liz.*"

...was a boy who always had multiple plans running through his mind.

Following his words, the Marshall II R's hatch quickly opened up.

"Wha... AH?!" Hugo exclaimed in shock as he saw a gathering of silver-colored liquid metal on the button opening the hatch.

It was Liz the Mithril Arms Slime.

Rook had hid her existence from the moment they'd introduced themselves and used her while making sure that Hugo wouldn't notice. Liz had been the very thing coating the surface of the dragon horn lance in a brilliant silver. She'd snuck into the cockpit the moment the weapon had pierced inside.

Originally, the plan had been that she would just cut Hugo apart, but the heat of the Purgatorial Slash had made a lot of her volume evaporate, making her lack the strength to do it. Thus, all Liz could do was press the button to the Marshall II R's hatch.

However, that was more than enough. After all, with the hatch open, nothing was separating Hugo and Rook's group...

"Male Temptation."

"Lilim Temptation."

...letting the Pimp and the succubus do what they did best.

"Checkmate," Rook proclaimed. With those words, the battle of the western gate was ended.

Chapter Seven: The Right Arm of the Victor

???

The Kingdom of Altar's Knights of the Royal Guard.

That was the name of the order closest to the royal family — the knights who served and protected them with their very lives.

The minimum requirement to join them was to become a Paladin, a high-rank job of the knight grouping, while their leader the commander had the Superior Job known as "Celestial Knight." This had been the case for the entirety of the order's history.

Being the strongest knight of his generation, the commander had been entrusted with one of the kingdom's national treasures, a Prism Steed, and he had ridden it as he led the country's forces into battle.

As the strongest of knights leading the proudest order, the Kingdom of Altar's Royal Guard had been the very symbol of their country, which was often called "the land of knights."

Again, "*had been.*"

As things were now, the Royal Guard was generally referred to as a thing of the past. The most glorious Altarian knight order had been all but annihilated about half a year ago, *Dendrogram* time.

During the so-called "First Knight-Machine War," a certain portion of the Dryfe Imperium's forces had killed about 60% of the Royal Guard's members. That was bad by itself, but it was even worse when you considered the fact that, in a sense, it had been done by just a single person: Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

He was one of Dryfe's three — two at the time — Superiors.

Hell General was a Superior Job that mixed frontline battle qualities with army commanding. However, its most notable trait was its focus on summoning devils at the cost of sacrifices.

"Here and now, I consign these many lives I have at my disposal. Remove the lid of hell and gather, my forces," he had intoned. "Call Devil Regiment."

During the war, the Hell General had summoned more than three thousand devils. The man-eating army had been as tough as it was ravenous, and they'd had little trouble dealing with thousands of the kingdom's soldiers. Even the Paladin-filled Royal Guard had lost over a hundred members upon intercepting them.

As the victims had continued to pile up, the commander of the

Royal Guard — Celestial Knight, Langley Grandria — had broken through the devilish ranks all by himself and made it through to their leader and source, the Hell General.

True, many might have argued that Langley hadn't been alone in his charge. He was simply the only one who had *survived while trying to get to Logan*.

Neither the vice commander at that time, nor the many other skilled, max-level members of the Royal Guard, had been able to survive the devilish onslaught, which had left the Celestial Knight to face the Hell General all by his lonesome.

Their fight had been overwhelming in its intensity.

The Celestial Knight had been considered to be one of the strongest tian vanguard fighters, and he'd proven how worthy he was of that title by fighting toe-to-toe with the Hell General, a Master bearing bonuses given by his Embryo.

The devils at Logan's command had tried to swarm him, but even they had been able to do little to protect their summoner.

"I won't let you stain the kingdom's lands with the blood of my brethren any longer!" Langley had called. "Logan Goddhart, I shall defeat you and banish your devils!"

"Gh! Shit...!"

In a one-on-one battle, the Celestial Knight had been above the Hell General. Langley had seemed to have a chance to emerge victorious and make the devilish army disappear. However...

"Umm, hello hello? Your Excellency the General? You okay? The King of Beasts already took care of the Archsage, y'know? Wait, what? You're not done yet? Are you actually about to lose? Well, ain't that just troubling, your excellency. (lol)" ...a voice of provocation ringing in the Hell General's ear had changed the situation by messing with his mind.

"DON'T MOCK ME, *FRANKLIN*!" Suddenly, the Hell General had yanked off one of the items he had equipped. It was a special reward he'd earned by defeating an Epic-tier UBM. "'Here and now, I consign this unique treasure! In exchange for its limitless value, grant me a moment of power! Come from the ancient times, O endless devil!' Call Devil Zero Exceed!"

Thus, the Hell General had sacrificed a special reward to summon a devil with power matching a Mythical UBM.

The addition of such a being had instantly turned the tides of battle, making it end with the death of the Celestial Knight. There had also been the destruction of his beloved Prism Steed, the kingdom's national treasure. So the country had lost both its human *and* material symbols.

Following that conclusion, the Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, had

gone for the finishing blow and used his modified monsters to attack the forces led by King Eldor Zeo Altar himself.

In the end, the king and all his men had become sustenance for the creatures.

Thus, the Royal Guard had lost their brethren and leader to the Hell General, and their lord to the Giga Professor.

After the war was halted, the order had reorganized, giving their late leader's daughter and the fifth among their ranks, Liliana Grandria, the position of vice commander. With that, she had risen to the top of the Knights of the Royal Guard.

She had been made the vice commander rather than commander because she was the strongest among the order's survivors, but she had yet to inherit the title of Celestial Knight. Every one of the order's commanders for the entirety of its history had had that Superior Job, so the country believed that a Paladin who had yet to gain Celestial Knight wasn't worthy of that title.

Though Liliana wasn't weak, she certainly wasn't at the level of Superior Jobs. The combined level of everyone else in the order was significantly lower than it had been, as well. And the number of those who could use the ultimate job skill, Grand Cross, or the hidden skill, Purifying Silverlight, could be counted on one hand. Thus, the position of commander and the throne of the Celestial Knight had been rendered empty.

The order's failure to protect their lord had severely damaged their status in the kingdom. Countless people had looked down on them, and the surviving knights themselves had been extremely ashamed of their dishonor. Many had quit being knights, run away, or switched to other orders, reducing the size of the Royal Guard yet again. What had once been an elite army amounting to three hundred had become a group of a mere fifty.

Still, all of those remaining had a strong will and a goal to go with it.

Was it a craving for revenge against the Hell General and the Giga Professor? Did they wish to avenge their lord and many brethren?

Wrong.

That sentiment was certainly there, but it was nothing compared to what lay at the core of their beings. What they truly desired was simply "to protect them."

They wished to succeed where they'd once failed, to ensure the safety of the three princesses left behind by their lord and protect the people of the Kingdom of Altar.

Bearing the many hardships, the members of the order still gave their all to their role as knights.

◆

And so, they dashed.

Reaching and breaking the limits of their power, the order struggled against the abomination before them, the RSK. They gave their all to defeat their foe and rescue their princess, and their efforts made them shine like the protagonists of a knight epic.

“Oh, they’re shining, all right,” I said with a grin. *“Like candles in the wind.”*

Looking around, I — Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin — saw members of the Royal Guard lying on the ground beneath us. Their total number had fallen below the already-small fifty, and those of them still able to move were few and far between. Most of them had been defeated by my RSK.

He was a custom-made modified monster, a cracked sphere of flesh supported by ten tentacles. The creature was based on Evil Offspring and Ropers, and had potential to be classified among the more powerful members of them.

Besides the tentacles, he didn’t have any other... interesting features. It wasn’t like I couldn’t have added any, but considering his main target, doing so would’ve been pointless.

His skillset and biological tissue were so complicated that he couldn’t have been made by the standard Monster Creation skill. I had only been able to do it because of my Superior Embryo’s ultimate skill, “Playing God — Pandemonium.”

Though custom-made and quite complex, the RSK was a monster I’d hurriedly created during the span of last night. I hadn’t had time to test whether he could live and function properly, so the Royal Guard’s presence here was very convenient in that regard. The many dead knights lying around him made it clear that the RSK was a success.

“All seems to be A-okay,” I said, pleased. “The attacks are on the weaker side, but that’s not unexpected.”

The lack of damage made it entirely possible that the poor RG folk around it were simply “dying,” rather than “dead.”

Of course, I intend to finish them off, I thought.

The only still-moving knights were Vice Commander Liliana and Lin-whatshisface — the third among them.

“Sir Lindos! Let’s use the stack!” she called.

“Understood!”

Having some sort of plan, they split up and positioned themselves at twelve o’clock and three o’clock around the RSK, clearly readying themselves for a focused attack from both of those directions.

“Grand Cross!” they shouted, causing a sky-reaching pillar of light to burst out from below the RSK.

Grand Cross was a Paladin's ultimate job skill. It created a cross-shaped stream of holy light energy which seared anything in its way, making it an ability not to be underestimated. And the two knights had cast it at the exact same time, increasing its damage to a factor of two.

Naturally, it was a formidable technique, and if the elements matched up, it could perhaps even fell a Pure-Dragon in a single hit. The RSK was actually Pure-Dragon-tier when it came to stats, so the attack *could've* been extremely dangerous to him.

"Alas, it isn't," I said as I looked at the RSK, completely unhurt by the stacked Grand Cross.

He didn't have a single burn. The immense attack had been about as effective as a mosquito bite, if not less.

Seemingly irritated, the RSK fought back against the two attackers by either swinging his tentacles or opening many of its cracks and firing light projectiles from them.

"It can't be...! How could the stack do nothing to it?!" Sir Lin-whatsisface cried.

"Sir Lindos, not yet! It's too early to give up!"

"Mh...! Understood!"

And so, the two began attacking the RSK again.

Looks like they still intend to struggle, I thought. *Don't see why. It's useless, after all.*

"Heh... You might've stood a chance if you weren't Paladins," I grinned. Though, if that had been the case, I would've had them face a different product.

Anyway, there was no reasonable way for a Paladin — a job focused on the holy element and sword attacks — to win against the RSK. That's how I'd designed him, after all.

He was equipped with the physical damage-reducing Material Barrier and Holy Negation.

In addition to those skills, he also had Fire Negation, Poison Negation, Weakness Negation, and Intoxication Negation, which were mostly just extras to the "main feature" — the one I'd prepared specifically for that guy.

"Kheheheheheh," I chuckled. "Man, I hope he doesn't take too long."

I didn't know or care whether it was the hand of fate instantly making my hope a reality, but the RSK was suddenly assaulted by a grand flow of flame. The intense flamethrower was brought about by none other than Purgatorial Flames — an equipment skill from Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Of course, the RSK's Fire Negation made it come out completely unscathed.

But what mattered right now was the very usage of the Purgatorial Flames, for that meant that *he* had finally come.

“He’s here... He’s here he’s here HE’S HERE!” I screamed. Though a bit later than I’d anticipated, the star of the show was finally on the scene.

“Are you all right?!” Ray Starling asked the other two, upon joining the RG in their fight. With his silver Prism Steed, he appeared extremely prince-like, making his arrival seem reminiscent of another chapter in some knight tale.

And holy shit, is that hilarious.

“Ray?! Why are you here?” Liliana cried.

What a retarded question, I thought. Through my observations, I’d noticed that he was a man acting on the most hero-like impulses. If anyone before his eyes was in peril, he’d rush to help them while completely ignoring all related limitations and risks.

“I’m not exactly a fan of a scenario where a child gets kidnapped. It’d leave a bad taste in my mouth,” he said, proving my point. He simply hadn’t been able to stop himself from getting involved in tonight’s event.

“...I’m also here to beat the crap out of that guy,” he added, looking at me.

“Oh? You thought that far?” I said. “Man, that sure is something.”

Again, I was fully aware that he disregarded his limitations and risks. But I hadn’t actually expected him to come here intending to win against me — a Superior.

He was looking straight at me. Were his eyes full of antagonism? Hatred? Frustration? No... he was simply *mad*.

“KheHAH!” Unable to hold it in, I laughed in a weird manner.

He was completely serious. I knew very few people who were as earnest about *Infinite Dendrogram* as him. I could only name her — well, “him” in this world — and then there was the King of Tartarus, and of course me. As expected of a Maiden’s Master.

...Or perhaps he was a Maiden’s Master *because* he was this kind of person?

Regardless, I liked him a lot and was very pleased with his presence here. After all... *Breaking him will feel so good*, I thought with satisfaction.

“Flamingo, you’re going to be getting your due for what you did today *and* yesterday,” Ray snarled.

“Ahahah! Then I’m giving you yours for what you did a week ago, dog ears,” I grinned.

Welcome, Ray Starling, I thought, smirking. *The RSK, your nemesis, awaits.*



West of the duel city, Jeand Grasslands, Paladin, Ray Starling

“The stage is set and the cast is here. Heheh!” For reasons unknown to me, Franklin cackled, clearly unable to contain his amusement.

Right now, he was standing on a floating, platform-like monster surrounded by a visible barrier. Princess Elizabeth was on the ground at his feet.

“All right, then, Ray my boy!” he said as he pointed to the night sky. “Feast your eyes on *this*!”

Looking up, I saw a monster that looked like a giant eye with bat wings.

“That’s a Broadcast Eye,” Franklin continued. “Everything it sees and hears is sent to a receiver monster that projects the data as a 3D movie.”

So it’s basically a living camera, I thought.

“Right as we speak, everything it sees and hears is being turned into a hologram and projected over Gideon. If everything is working as intended, whatever’s happening here should be visible to everyone in the central arena, every one of Gideon’s districts, and even the royal capital.”

“Why is this necessary?” I asked.

In response, Franklin grinned and raised one of the fingers on his right hand. “The first reason is to have the kingdom’s people witness the course of events here. Without a live broadcast, they wouldn’t know the process, and would just make their own assumptions about the result, which is no good to me.” He paused, and then continued. “After all, I want to break this country’s spirit.”

The amused sneer on his face was nothing but nauseating.

“It would all be pointless if the Altarians don’t see the people they so rely on display pathetic impotency as they fall before my creation, and don’t witness the powerlessness of the duel city. Surely you understand, right? Dying during your sleep isn’t scary, so I’m gonna open their eyes and show them the fingers digging into their necks.”

“...Makes sense, but man, that’s a pretty messed-up mentality.”

“Khah!” he laughed. “Well, it’s not like *I’m* the one who needs this... Anyway, on to the second reason.” Franklin then raised a finger on his left hand. “I want to publicly humiliate the ones who chased after me.”

“...You what?”

“Hahahah! Man, if things had gone according to plan, no one would’ve come here in the first place. But now we have the RG and you, and boy oh boy, are you all a nuisance! You’re delaying my

darling Plan A! And since you got in my way, I decided to get rid of you all while also making you the laughingstock of the kingdom.”

“I had a hunch, but you’re actually an asshole, aren’t you?” I said. “And what’s with the assumption that no one was gonna get in your way if you went out the western gate? Seems pretty naïve, if you ask me.”

Not to mention that there were many who would get in his way even if his plan was a success.

“If that signboard was anything to go by, he lets tians pass, right?” I continued. “That means that Liliana and her people would’ve been here even if I wasn’t.”

“...Wrong,” said Franklin as his smile disappeared. “If *you* weren’t here, she wouldn’t have come here, either.”

Following those words, for reasons unknown, he glared at me with some of the sharpest eyes imaginable.

However, that expression didn’t last more than a moment, and he was soon back to his maniacal grin. “Anyway, let’s begin,” he said. “RSK... the test is over.”

Suddenly, the monster Liliana and her knights were fighting turned to face me.

The more I looked at the creature, the more eerie it seemed. Though its size was about the same as Gardrand’s, its appearance was completely unlike that of any monster I’d faced so far. It was a flesh-colored sphere with many cracks on it and ten thick tentacles protruding out of its body. The appendages were highly reminiscent of skin turned a dark blue due to blood loss.

“We fought something straight out of a horror movie just yesterday,” I muttered. “And now this thing here is like a nightmare.”

The monster was the type to make people feel uneasy and scared simply due to how hard-to-define it was.

“Indeed,” said Nemesis. “Though I find this one far easier to handle than any undead. But Ray, you *do* understand, right?”

Yeah, I thought. I know I acted all brave and all, but the situation here is pretty bad.

“If it hadn’t been for the battle at the gate, we could’ve tried for a Counter Absorption and Vengeance is Mine combo, but now that we don’t have that luxury, we can only hope that this creature doesn’t hit as hard as Gardrand or Gouz-Maise.”

True, I thought. After all, my preemptive Purgatorial Flames didn’t seem to work, either.

With all the Royal Guards lying around the area, Hellish Miasma wasn’t an option. Then there was the fact that Liliana and her knights — who were surely above me in terms of pure Paladin ability — had been completely overwhelmed, meaning that my normal attacks

would do little... if anything. The unfavorable situation also prevented me from using *that*, leaving me with nothing except for Vengeance is Mine, but...

“Mh...”

Can I really use it? I thought.

“Ray?” Nemesis asked.

Just like in my previous battles against foes far stronger than me, my intuition was trying to tell me something.

The visual nausea the RSK made me feel was accompanied by chills that were hard to describe, similar to — but quite unlike — the ones I’d felt when fighting my worst enemy so far, Gouz-Maise.

If that amalgam of the undead loathed all the living, then it was almost like this abomination hated only one thing...

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Franklin raised his voice, cutting my thoughts short. He was looking directly at the Broadcast Eye and acting like he was live on TV. “This is a stream for the people of Gideon and the rest of the kingdom! Hello again or for the first time! I am Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin, and I’m here to show you the climax of my game!”

Upon saying that, he took out a device looking much like a mobile terminal from about three decades back: a smartphone.

“This right here is the switch that releases the monsters I’ve set up in the duel city!”

“...Gh!” I voiced my frustration.

“This switch has a timer function, and it’s set to launch a signal to release all the monsters after 652 seconds!” he continued. “Though, we do have some early birds thanks to a bunch of hot-blooded idiots who tried to escape the arena by attacking the barrier.”

“Release all the monsters?! But wait, that’s...!” said Liliana with a tense expression, which made Franklin’s grin widen.

“Oh, yeees, 500 monsters stronger than your average Demi-Dragon will be released to the city all at once. Well, they happen to be set to attack only Masters, but they’re relentless and don’t hesitate to destroy buildings, either.”

His words and our situation here were being broadcast to everyone in Gideon. Franklin used this to heighten their fear by showing them the remaining number of seconds before the time bomb finally went off.

“Well, as for what I’ll do with this switch... Whoosh!” he said, throwing it towards the RSK.

The monster responded to the action by opening its fleshy sphere and taking the switch inside before closing again, which was a scene highly reminiscent of a clone feeding.

“So yeah, there are about 600 seconds left until the signal goes

out, and the only way to stop it is to kill my boy the RSK here.” Franklin fell silent for a moment before pointing to Liliana in an exaggerated manner and speaking up again. “The ones braving this fight are these noble Paladins, the vice commander and third knight of the Royal Guard — Lady Grandria and Sir Lindos!”

After pointing to them...

“And let’s not forget the only Master here! Another Paladin, Ray Starling!”

...his finger was redirected at me.

“Can the three Paladins protect the city of duels?! It all rests in their hands!”

With excessively grandiose presentation, he was setting up the stage for the “public humiliation” he was talking about.

“So, uh...”

Thus came his final words.

“Blame *them* when the city’s gone, okaaay?”

Which he said with nothing but malice and glee.

“What an incorrigible bastard!” exclaimed Nemesis.

He sure is, but comments about him will have to wait, I thought.

The flesh-colored orb was already making a move. The many cracks on its surface all opened up like wounds and released dazzling streams of eye-piercing light.

Feeling as though I was barraged by countless camera flashes, I could barely keep on looking at it.

“A blinding move?!” I exclaimed.

“Ray! This light is followed by an attack!” Liliana warned us, but my Silver was already dashing away.

“Kh!” Suddenly, something hit the place I was at and exploded.

They were light projectiles the RSK fired during the blinding flashes, and their power was about three times greater than the White Lance Gems I’d used.

However, *that was the extent of it*.

I’d failed to evade one of them. The impact had been nothing impressive, while the damage had only cost me about a tenth of my HP.

“This isn’t beyond us!” cried Nemesis.

Indeed. We could do this, no problem. I simply had to bear its attacks, heal myself, and land a Vengeance is Mine after getting enough damage.

From what I’d seen of the Royal Guard’s fight against it, the RSK had a constantly-active barrier against physical damage and extremely high resistances against holy attacks and fire. However, the damage from Vengeance was fixed and doubled, making it perfectly capable of taking out large portions of the thing’s HP.

At least, that's how it should go, I thought. But... why am I feeling so uneasy?

"Your intuition rarely fails when we're in a predicament," said Nemesis. "There might be more to this abomination than meets the eye. However..."

...Vengeance is our only option against it, so that's what we have to go with, I agreed.

"Oh, by the way," said Franklin. "The barrier of this darling I'm riding right now is directly linked to the RSK, so you have to beat my boy even if you prioritize saving the princess."

...Even more reason to use it, then.

"Looks like it's do-or-die," said Nemesis.

"Yeah." I nodded. "...Let's go!"

"Certainly!" With that settled, I made Silver gallop towards the RSK.

Making sure not to stop for a second, I evaded — or purposely took — the light attacks while occasionally going on the offensive myself.

All of my sword slashes were negated by the barrier on its surface, and the same went for my Purgatorial Flames. However, due to the beast being so abnormal, I didn't stop my fruitless attacks, hoping that I could perhaps find a source of its power or something.

Of course, I also didn't neglect to use my healing magic or items to keep my HP up. Thanks to my 5,000+ HP, Paladin's Aegis, my general endurance, and the RSK's lacking offensive abilities, I was able to stack up a considerable amount of damage. It all seemed to be going very well... but my unease showed no signs of abating.

"Wait, the accumulated damage is... what?" said Nemesis. "No, it's pretty clear it came from the abomination, but..."

"Nemesis?"

"O-Oh, sorry. It's just that... I just felt something off."

About the accumulated damage, right? I thought. Nemesis seemed to have an ability to "feel" the enemies that have damaged us. She'd used it during the Gouz-Maise battle, too.

"Off? In what way?" I asked.

"The damage is clearly coming from this RSK monster, but it feels like it's... scattered all over."

Scattered?

"If I were to liken it to something from your world, I'd say that it feels as though I'm looking at an X-ray displaying the spread of cancer cells within the body."

"...Wait." *Doesn't that mean that the RSK is still the thing that's accumulating damage?*

"Yes, that's correct..." she replied, and even though it was

telepathic, I could easily tell that she felt uneasy about this unfamiliar sensation.

“...Let’s try using it once,” I said.

“I don’t believe we have enough damage to kill it, though.”

“And that’s exactly why we have to try. My gut and your feeling are telling us that something’s wrong. Rather than having to deal with something unexpected when we go for the finisher, we should confirm our suspicions right now.”

“...Very well!”

“Silver!” I shouted as I kicked my steed’s sides and pulled his reins, making him speed towards the RSK.

Passing the barrage of light attacks, we closed the distance between us and the abomination. Once it was within range, I swung Nemesis at one of its tentacles, fully intending to cut it off. Then we used the ace up our sleeve, our only means of fighting it.

“Vengeance is Mine!” we shouted in unison, activating the skill that had felled many of our opponents.

Our first foe — the Demi-Dragon Worm.

The tri-faced beast of flame and poison — Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda.

The amalgam of people’s death and malice — Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise.

With all the powerful enemies it had helped us defeat, it was small wonder why it was our most trusted skill.

Now, we had used it on the mysterious creature called “the RSK.”

“How...?” Nemesis said in bewilderment, and not without reason, for Vengeance *hadn’t hurt it in the least*. My greatsword had simply slipped on the RSK’s surface, not destroying a single inch of it.

The attack had rendered us defenseless, and a light projectile that came from one of the monster’s cracks landed directly on me. It took away about a third of my total HP, but I couldn’t manage to care about that.

“Why...?” I murmured. The only thing on my mind was my skill — Vengeance is Mine. It doubled the damage I’d received from my enemies and brought it back to them, completely ignoring any defenses.

It had worked every time I’d used it on anything that had accumulated damage on me.

However, it’d had absolutely no effect on the RSK.

“Ohhh maaan, what a great expression.” I heard a voice thick with intoxication.

“Franklin!” I shouted.

His face was still in a smile, but unlike the basic grin from before, it had become a thoroughly amused sneer. “Ahahah! You look so

dumbfounded. Have no idea what's going on, huh? 'Why? How? Wasn't our Vengeance absolute and unmatched, Nemmy-wemmy?!' Lol. Must've been hard to be cast as Nobuta just because of your glasses, eh, Ray-boy?"

"Wh...!"

"Oh, now you look even more surprised. Man, I'm loving this to bits."

The thing he'd just referred to was something I'd only told Nemesis... and that had been *after* Flamingo had left us. The fact that he knew it could only mean one thing...

"That drug you gave me had more than just the dog ear thing in it, huh?" I snapped.

"Ohhh, yeah it did," he answered as he reached into his pocket and took out a drug bottle filled with the exact same mixture he'd given me yesterday. "The drug I gave you was a Lesser Elixir and Animal Ear Drug cocktail..." He then opened the bottle and poured the contents into his hand.

"...but there was more than just the drug in there," he said as liquid flowed out of the palm, leaving behind a marble-sized object. "This little beauty is a PSS — a Peeping Spy Slime. They're always in a liquid state, have no means of fighting, and get digested by humans in about 24 hours... But in exchange for being so powerless, for as long as they're alive, they send me the stats, skill info, and the words of those they've been ingested by." His grin widened. "Getting the person to not find it suspicious or stay online can be a bit hard, I'll tell you that."

Couldn't you have gone with something else? I thought as I put my hand on my mouth in disgust. *I can't believe I drank a damn slime!*

"I know everything at your disposal," he continued. "Your Nemesis's three Embryo skills, Miasmaflame Bracers, Greaves of Grudge, your real Prism Steed, your own skills — including Purifying Silverlight — and even the various tactics you used in your battle against the Lich Maise and Gouz-Maise."

That was everything I had. Everything I could attempt to do had been leaked to him.

"And my boy the RSK here was made to counter everything you've got," he finished proudly.

"...As in?"

"Vengeance is Mine doesn't work on him, he doesn't give any debuffs, he negates Purgatorial Flames, Hellish Miasma, Purifying Silverlight, and even Grand Cross, if you had it. Standard attacks of your level don't hurt him, either. Against you, the RSK is completely unbeatable. After all..."

Franklin momentarily stopped talking and flashed an almost

dazzling smile before continuing.

“He’s the *Ray Starling Killer*. Custom-made just to defeat you.”

“...Made to... what?”

It’s actually called “Ray Starling Killer”? I thought. Franklin seriously made a monster for the sole purpose of defeating me?

“So yeah, you’re losing no matter what. My boy the RSK cost me a whole 100,000,000 lir, but hey, money spent on victory ain’t money wasted, right?”

“Why...?” I burst out.

Why is Franklin — a Superior — doing so much against me? Didn’t we meet just yesterday? Does it have something to do with Hugo?

“‘Why,’ you ask? Yeah, I guess it must be strange to you. Why would a Superior like me throw such serious money to deal with such a nobody?” he said as his smile vanished. “That’s because I’ve *lost* against you once.” His eyes had turned scarily serious, making me feel as though they could pierce me.

“You lost to me?” I asked. “When did that happen?”

As my confusion reached its peak, Franklin pointed below... at Liliana, who was fighting the RSK.

“I had a plan to assassinate Liliana Grandria, you see,” he said. “You completely destroyed it, so I decided to single you out.”

A plan to assassinate Liliana...? Does he mean the time I...?

“If you hadn’t gotten involved, that bear man wouldn’t have been there either, and the fifty Demi-Dragon Worms would’ve surely taken care of Liliana. *You* ruined my plan and made me lose, Ray Starling.”

Bear man — my brother.

Fifty Demi-Dragon Worms — Old Reve Orchard.

“And then, a guy with glasses told me, ‘If you have this incense, you can go get some from the orchard outside.’” I remembered Milianne’s words from back then, and it all made sense now.

“I *can’t stomach* anyone who makes me lose or yield,” Franklin continued. “Whenever someone like that appears, I set up a rematch and make sure they lose so thoroughly it’s pathetic. Then they never feel like standing in my way ever again, and you won’t be any different. Now just lose and become the laughingstock of the kingdom, will ya?” His expression and voice as he said that were thick with madness.

Though it wasn’t like he didn’t make sense. I could understand why he resented me so much. Really well, in fact.

“All right, I understand why you went and built an anti-me thing,” I said.

So he was the one responsible for that situation, huh? I thought.

“Hahahah! Good to see you get it.”

“Oh, I do,” I assured him. “And I also get... that now I have to

punch you.”

“...What?” Franklin asked, looking visibly puzzled.

What? Did I stutter? 'Cause I sure as hell didn't say anything weird.

“You know, you got a child... Milianne... involved in that incident, and when she told me about the man in glasses, a specific thought went through my mind.” I recalled exactly what I'd thought back then and put it into words. “I'd like to punch that idiot for sending a kid to a place this dangerous.”

I hadn't known the culprit, and both Milianne and Liliana had been okay. Due to that, I'd shelved the sentiment, but I sure as hell hadn't forgiven the bastard.

“So yeah, now that I know that *you're* the one responsible, I'm gonna settle this.”

“Kh...”

“I'll say it again...” I raised my bracer-covered hand and pointed my index finger directly at him before making my proclamation. “My fist is going straight into your face. Keep it clean for me, Superior.”

“Do your worst... newbie!”

Following that exchange, the RSK moved to stand between me and Franklin.

This thing was a monster a Superior had made for the sole purpose of defeating me. Thus, it made perfect sense that Liliana and her knights had had such a hard time with it.

“It's because they're Paladins...” I murmured. The countermeasures made against my job were fully functional against them, as well.

Damn shame, I thought.

Still, if they hadn't been Paladins, Franklin would've probably released some other monsters.

He could actually do so now, if he so desired, but he didn't, because he wanted to break my spirit by making me lose completely and create a show where those protecting the city got defeated by a single monster without anyone leaving as much as a scratch on it.

Franklin probably *would* summon more monsters if we defeated the RSK.

However, with the RSK gone, we would stop the monster release in Gideon, and the disappearance of the barrier would give us a chance to save the princess.

“There's no change to what we have to do, then,” I said. “We kill the Ray Starling Killer... Man, what a damn stupid name.”

“For that, we must find out why Vengeance doesn't work on it,” added Nemesis.

“I think I know why.”

“Eh?”

“Let me just see if I’m right,” I said as pulled on Silver’s reins, making him stop.

“Ray?!”

I closed my right eye and made my left one open wide before placing my left hand on my face and looking at the RSK through the gap.

The thing was still releasing flashes and light attacks through its many cracks. Naturally, looking directly at it would burn my eyes as effectively as looking at the sun through a telescope. However, I ignored the searing sensation on my left retina and strained to see into the sources of the light — the cracks.

The brightness was literally blinding, and making anything out was a real challenge, but I kept my eye open with the intention to see what I was certain was there.

And so...

“Thought as much.”

...a light projectile hit me the very moment I saw *it*.

Combined with the damage from the previous attack, my HP was now below half.

“Ray! Force Heal!” Liliana cast a healing spell on me from a short distance away. It was more powerful than the spell I had at my disposal, and it instantly got my HP up to 90%.

“Ray... You fool! That was nothing if not suicidal!” Nemesis screamed.

“Ray! What you did just now was far too careless!” Liliana chastised.

Nemesis and Liliana telling me off at the same time produced a stereo-like effect.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “It was worth it, though, ’cause I saw *it*.”

Even after the effects of Liliana’s healing magic, my left eye was still somewhat damaged. However, I’d gotten something really good in exchange.

“*I saw a name in the light*,” I said.

“A name?” asked Nemesis.

“In one of those shining cracks, I was able to make out the name display of a different monster than the RSK.”

“Does that mean that...?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “The RSK isn’t alone. We’re being attacked by other monsters.”



In *Infinite Dendrogram*, there was a monster type called “Children of the Wicked God,” which was often simplified to just “Evil

Offspring.”

Their main characteristic was that they *had no designated shape*.

The same could be said for slimes, but rather than being completely amorphous, Evil Offspring grew body parts and organs as they saw fit.

They all began life as spheres of flesh, but as they matured, they grew organs and other body parts, which differed depending on the environment they were in. For example, those that were surrounded by predators would grow many ears and eyes to help them sense danger, while those living in cliffy areas would grow many arms to help them climb.

Even if they were driven by necessity and their methods were appropriate for human standards of practicality, their manner of being definitely wasn't comfortable to observe.

Combined with the fact that they had a tendency to go for easy targets and thus often took to consuming young creatures — be they animal, human, or other Evil Offspring — they had become feared to the point of acquiring that name.

When making the RSK, Franklin had thought about basing it around the use of an Evil Offspring's organ specialization ability. After all, the creatures weren't limited to just ears, eyes, or limbs — they could even create organs which released damaging light projectiles. However, Franklin had decided to take it a step further by modifying it to *create other monsters that could attack in its stead*.

He'd empowered the specialization function to the point where the attacking parts would count as monsters separate from the RSK, while also making sure that they would always be under the RSK's control, rather than autonomous.

Such ludicrous modifications were impossible for standard Monster Creation, the researcher grouping skill that allowed the person to use lots of materials to create many monsters of the same type. Though additional ingredients could give slight changes to stats or give an extra skill or two, there was little room for any big modifications. However, to Franklin, it was entirely possible thanks to his Superior Embryo's ultimate skill, Playing God — Pandemonium.

The result of his efforts, the RSK, was a monster that had many negation skills and generated other monsters using its Kin Creation skill while doing *absolutely nothing* by itself.

Leaving the attacking to other monsters would normally have been meaningless, while its many negation skills could normally have been avoided by simply using an element that wasn't covered by them.

Due to that, despite being so detailed, the RSK was nothing but a standard Pure-Dragon-class monster.

But that certainly wasn't the case for a certain Master.



"Other monsters?" Liliana spoke, clearly confused. "But when he called it, he only named the RSK."

"Then they were probably created inside the eyes after it was summoned," I said. "I mean, plant-like monsters sometimes create allies, so who's to say this one can't?"

On our journey to Gideon, we'd encountered several monsters that could multiply by dividing or throwing seeds.

"What is the point of that...?" she asked.

"Well, normally, there'd be none. The result would be the same regardless of whether the attacks came from the RSK itself or other monsters."

However, this method of attack made a world of difference for me and Nemesis.

"As it says in the name, 'Ray Starling Killer' was made to kill me, and my and Nemesis's trump card is Vengeance is Mine — a counterattack that returns double the damage I receive from the enemy."

Therefore...

"This skill has no effect if the target doesn't attack me. The most effective move against us is *to not do anything*."

That was the crux of it all. What damaged us were the monsters the RSK created, rather than the RSK itself, which rendered Vengeance unusable... or "useless," rather.

After all, no amount of multiplication could make 0 be more than 0.

It was also fair to assume that the light show the RSK created was there to visually conceal the fact that it was a gathering of monsters.

Anyway, I now knew the truth behind it. Vengeance could do nothing against the RSK itself, and even if I killed the attacking monsters, they would just be re-created.

"So, are you done clarifying how screwed you are?" mocked a malicious voice.

"Franklin..."

"Man, you're fast. I expected to see you panic as you tried to figure it out. Well, not that anything changes now that you know!" He formed another sneer.

Franklin wasn't wrong about that. My knowing how the RSK worked didn't change anything.

However...

"I'm *relieved* that there's a reason why my Vengeance doesn't work," I said.

“...‘Relieved?’” Franklin repeated the word as his smile vanished and his brow furrowed.

“It means that not even a Superior like you was able to create a monster that was invincible *just because*.”

“Kh...”

Superiors were the pinnacle of players. They were the strongest elite of Masters and Embryos that didn’t even amount to a hundred. And yet, not even one of them had been able to make an undefeatable being.

“That means that there’s something I can do,” I continued. “Even if it’s nearly zero... as long as the possibility is there, I’ll never give up trying to seize it.” The words I spoke were the same ones my brother had told me... the ones I’d recalled during the Gouz-Maise battle.

“Khah!” Franklin laughed. “Not giving up is fine and all, but you only have 270 seconds left. What can you do in just over four minutes?”

In response, I brandished Nemesis and pointed her at the RSK before speaking up. “Kill that thing.”

“...Hmph.”

All right, I have four minutes, I thought. So far, neither I nor Liliana nor Sir Lindos had done anything that had an effect.

My Vengeance and Purgatorial Flames were both useless, and since the RSK didn’t give any debuffs, using Like a Flag Flying the Reversal would be meaningless. Hellish Miasma wasn’t an option, either, since there were people lying around it. Then again, if Franklin was telling the truth, it wouldn’t have had any effect, either.

“Mm...?” I murmured.

“Vengeance is Mine doesn’t work on him, he doesn’t give any debuffs, he negates Purgatorial Flames, Hellish Miasma, Purifying Silverlight, and even Grand Cross, if you had it.”

Upon recalling Franklin’s words, I realized that there were two strange things about them. First, there was the fact that he had gone out of his way to tell me what the RSK negated.

If he’d stayed quiet, I would’ve wasted a bunch of the little time we had left just attempting those skills, and he would have derived enjoyment from watching me try and fail.

Why did he say it and throw that scenario to the wind? I thought. Did it just slip out because he was feeling uppity... or is there some other reason?

The second strange thing was the fact that the measures he’d named didn’t cover everything I had.

“...Oh, yeah,” I muttered. “He did say that it was 24 hours.”

That PSS had been alive and feeding my info to Franklin for a whole day since yesterday morning. Due to that, it wasn’t strange for

him not to know it.

Still, it's unlikely that I can win against it with just this and... Wait, I thought. If I combine these two things... I might have a chance.

"Ray?" asked Nemesis.

"We have a way to turn this thing around," I said. "And I don't think that Franklin knows about it."

"...You mean *that*?"

"Yeah, *that*," I replied. "If we mix it with another gamble, we might be able to win against that thing. The risk is pretty great, though. If I'm wrong, what we'll do here will be pretty suicidal."

"I don't believe that any risks we take can be worse than us losing this fight."

"Good point. Still, there's a problem."

I looked at the RSK... or, rather, at the ground around it. There were a number of incapacitated Royal Guard knights there, and I couldn't make my move until I helped them. I was about to go and try getting them away from there...

"You have a plan, yes?" Sir Lindos stopped fighting the RSK and asked.

"It's a huge gamble," I replied. "But if it goes well, I might be able to take care of the monster release time limit."

"Can I help in any way?"

His words made my eyes open wide. I'd only met him yesterday and seen him once again today, but from that alone, I figured that he didn't have the best opinion of us Masters.

"...I know what you want to say," he continued. "However, my opinion means little here. What's important right now..."

"...are the people of Gideon and the princess?" I completed his sentence.

"Exactly." Sir Lindos put on a smile, to which I responded with my own.

"Now, is there anything Lady Grandria and I can do?" he asked.

"I would like you to move the Royal Guard near the RSK away from it," I answered. "Do it within the next two minutes and take them at least 100 meter... I mean, 'metels' away."

The *buildup* would probably take two minutes.

"Also, you need to keep the RSK in place and make sure you're nowhere near it when I get close."

"That sure is a lot of orders... But very well. Did you hear him, Lady Grandria?!"

"Yes! Leave the rescue to me!" Liliana called.

"Then I shall keep it from moving!"

The two split the roles and charged towards the RSK. Liliana evaded the light projectiles and saved the Royal Guard members while

Sir Lindos kept the RSK in place.

Their skill as Paladins was clearly greater than mine, and I would've been lying if I'd said it didn't move me.

"Let's not fall behind... SILVER!" I called.

My mount neighed.

"Wind Hoof... activate!"

Thus, I used one of the skills on my Prism Steed, Zephyrus Silver.



West of duel city Gideon, Jeand Grasslands

Ray's words made Silver use a skill which distorted their appearance.

It was caused by Wind Hoof's compressed air barrier bending the light around them.

"...Why now?" Franklin asked, slightly surprised and confused. It wasn't because he was witnessing something unknown. Quite the opposite — he knew the skill well, but he didn't see any reason to use it. "I mean, that's a skill for mobility and defense, right?"

Since PSS had been inside Ray when he'd acquired the Prism Steed, Franklin had received its info and knew the details of Wind Hoof. It was a compressed air barrier skill with a flying — or rather, "air-walking" — ability as a bonus.

Wind Hoof certainly wasn't special, either, as mount-type special equipment or monsters with similar skills weren't all that uncommon.

Franklin's countermeasure to this barrier was already in place, too. After all, the many light projectiles fired by the monsters inside the RSK would have little trouble breaking through it. He would've added some defensive function if Wind Hoof had been an attack skill, but that just wasn't the case.

"There's nothing special in the skill's description, so nothing should happen if he uses it... right?" Franklin muttered his thoughts as he looked at Silver using Identification. However, the confirmation did little to abate his inexpressible unease.

Franklin wasn't actually wrong in the least. Wind Hoof was most definitely a skill for a compressed air barrier and aerial movement, and normally, it wouldn't be anything to worry about.

At least, *as long as Ray didn't combine it with another item.*

"Gouz-Maise!" Ray shouted, his words resounding throughout the surroundings.

As if they *heard him*, his dark purple greaves groaned in a manner reminiscent of the living dead. They began to flicker.

"Release... your MP!"

Suddenly, the Grudge-soaked Graves emitted immense amounts of magic into the surrounding air.

Normally, magic was colorless and permeable, but Gouz-Maise's energy had a blood-curdling, purple hue. That was due to it being the magic stored in Greaves of Grudge through its Grudge Conversion — a skill that changed the surrounding grudge and negative emotions into the wearer's SP or MP.

The magic released just now was so great it could make a magic-focused high-rank job turn green with envy. In fact, it could even match the maximum magic stores of such Superior Jobs.

"Whoa, whoa..." Franklin muttered as he backed away a bit.

The magic was equivalent to hundreds of thousands of MP — a number most maxed-out spellcasters could only dream of.

"So this is that skill..."

Of course, Franklin knew of Grudge Conversion, as well. However, he didn't see what had caused the magic stored to become that great.

"Where did he get all this grudge...? Damn it!" Realizing the cause, Franklin cut his words short and cursed. "*It's me!*"

The grudge... the negative emotions came from *the game that Franklin had started*.

He'd let his player killers and modified monsters run rampant throughout the city, and livestreamed himself laughing that he would release even more. Naturally, that had caused the tens of thousands of Gideoners to feel *fear*, which had then been absorbed by Gouz-Maise during Ray's ride through the city.

Though Gouz-Maise's nature made it so that its greatest source of energy was the grudge of the dead, the fear of the living was viable as well. Naturally, it was far weaker, but when it came from tens of thousands of people, the gathered MP could reach immense numbers.

Did I mess up? thought Franklin. *No, this phenomenon was unavoidable. Wait, the problem here is...*

During the RSK's creation, he'd pictured scenarios in which Ray used the MP from Gouz-Maise on Purgatorial Flames, Hellish Miasma, or Reversal, but those were already taken care of.

With those things out of the way, Franklin wanted to know the purpose behind Ray releasing all that magic power.

The answer to his question came quickly, since the purple magic in the air was suddenly absorbed by Silver. What followed was a mighty wind, coming from every direction imaginable.

No, "wind" wasn't appropriate, as Silver was simply *absorbing all the surrounding air*, all for the purpose of unleashing the full potential of Wind Hoof — the skill using the rider's MP to create a barrier of compressed air.

The hundreds of thousands of MP allowed Silver to gather so much air that both he and Ray disappeared from sight. The barrier had become so dense that it no longer allowed any light to pass,

leaving behind nothing but a pitch-black sphere.

“Khah...!”

Upon seeing it, Franklin instantly realized that, in this situation, *the barrier wasn't actually a barrier.*

“RSK! Move! Get away from there!” Franklin shouted.

Since no light could pass through the sphere, anyone inside wouldn't be able to see what was outside. If the RSK moved, Ray would be rendered unable to hit it.

“I won't allow that!”

But the RSK's movements were stopped by a certain Paladin — Sir Lindos.

“Grand Cross!” he shouted, unleashing his most powerful attack.

Just like before, the holy light did nothing to hurt the RSK, but that didn't matter, for even if it didn't take any damage, the pressure of the mighty skill dulled its movements. With that, the stage was set for Ray to unleash his attack.

“Tch! Ca—!” Franklin tried to Call for new monsters that could take care of the threat. However, before he could, the pitch-black wind began speeding towards the RSK.

Sir Lindos instantly went out of the sphere's way and distanced himself from it.

Upon being set free, the RSK tried to escape, but it was simply far too slow to avoid the black object heading towards it.

The spheres clashed, but didn't touch directly, as the RSK's Material Barrier was protecting it. No matter how densely it compressed the air, Wind Hoof was merely a barrier and thus didn't have much in the ways of damage.

Upon arriving at that realization using its limited thinking capabilities, the RSK became relieved. Its creator, on the other hand, clicked his tongue in frustration.

“Wind Hoof, *cancel.*”

The voice came from inside the compressed air barrier and wasn't heard by anyone outside, but everyone saw its effects.

The black sphere vanished, creating a mighty *explosion* which tore through the Material Barrier as though it was paper and hit the RSK.



Ray Starling had discovered this phenomenon by complete accident.

It had happened on the morning of the same day, when he was testing Wind Hoof and trying to find a way to make its compressed air barrier useful.

Even when Ray gave it all of his maximum MP, the resulting barrier couldn't shield him from attacks by the most basic monsters in

the Nex Plains, and he concluded that it was due to his MP being too low to unleash its full potential.

Then Ray got the idea to combine the skill with his Grudge-soaked Greaves.

Ever since he'd gotten the item, Grudge Conversion had been stocking up on a decent amount of MP — certainly greater than Ray's own maximum, at least — and he figured that it could be used to create a powerful barrier.

He turned out to be correct, and the resulting compressed air shield was strong enough to hold even when he got swarmed by monsters. It had the negative of rendering him incapable of seeing anything around him, but Ray figured that he could find a use for it regardless.

With his experiment done, he decided to fight the monsters swarming him. However, when he disabled Wind Hoof, Silver's surroundings *exploded*.

Or perhaps *burst* was the better word for it.

Surrounded by clouds of dust and a rain of monster guts, both Ray and Nemesis tilted their heads in confusion.

However, there was nothing curious about this.

Wind Hoof's barriers were made of gathered and compressed air, which *didn't disappear after the skill was canceled*. So, upon losing its "container," the air got scattered into the surroundings, creating an explosion in the process.

It was much like a bursting balloon, only hundreds... or thousands... of times greater. The only thing separating it from a bomb was the fact that there were no life-threatening shrapnel, but the explosive pressure was more than enough to tear a living being apart.

Upon further thought, Ray realized that the result was nothing if not obvious.

Fortunately, Silver himself was designed to not get caught up in the explosion, so Ray and Nemesis were completely fine. Otherwise, he'd have gotten the death penalty.

Though impressive overall, being surrounded by falling ground and flesh was enough to make Ray and Nemesis hesitate about using this skill combo. After a bit of talk, they concluded that it was too indiscriminate and dangerous and chose to never use it again.

Funnily enough, they ended up having to do it a second time on the same day, and with far greater MP than during the experiment.



Ray himself had had no idea just how powerful Wind Hoof would become when he gave it all the hundreds of thousands of MP from his

greaves... however...

“Looks like it was enough to break through its barrier,” Ray said as he looked at the RSK, lying on the ground, its insides exposed due to having lost its upper half.

The abomination wasn't the only thing that had been caught up in the explosion. The surrounding ground looked as though it had been turned upside down, making the area seem more like a “wasteland” than a “grassland.”

The damage caused was far greater than Ray had expected, and if there had been any other people nearby, the results would've been nothing but tragic.

“...Yeah, this definitely wasn't a skill I could use when the Royal Guard were lying here.” Ray worriedly looked around and saw Liliana and her knights, safe and sound.

“Right, then...” he said as he turned to the RSK again.

It wasn't over yet, as the monster still hadn't become particles of light. Ray didn't find that surprising, since he hadn't expected Wind Hoof's explosion to be enough.

“...Yeah, I figured as much,” he muttered as he noticed that the RSK began gradually *regenerating*.

Just like with Gouz-Maise, his enemy from yesterday, the flesh expanded and rebuilt the parts of the body it had lost.

With the RSK being a creature that could spawn monsters, the presence of a regenerative ability was par for the course.

Thus, Ray made the move he had in mind.

“...Let's go,” he said as he made Silver dash towards the abomination.

The RSK's regeneration speed increased exponentially in relation to the volume it regained, and soon enough, its offensive function was back up.

The cracks opened up again and began firing light projectiles towards Ray.

Their amount was significantly lower than before, but the reason for that was obvious. Not only had the explosion from Wind Hoof exterminated all the attacker minions it had had in its upper part, but the RSK was too preoccupied with regeneration to dedicate any energy to their creation.

“Break through... Silver!”

The Prism Steed ran on the air and gracefully avoided the light projectiles as he closed in on the RSK.

“You can make it!” Ray shouted.

The moment he was in range, Ray jumped off Silver's back and forced his left arm into the RSK's last wound. Though the meaty pressure wasn't pleasant, it wasn't strong enough to crush his limb.

“Gardranda!” he shouted, preparing his left bracer — the flame thrower — to fire.

“...Ha, now that’s just pointless,” said Franklin in a mocking voice that Ray was already familiar with, much to Ray’s dismay. “Didn’t I tell you that Purgatorial Flames and Hellish Miasma don’t work?”

The jerk was nowhere in sight, but his voice resounded throughout the surroundings.

“That attack sure as hell surprised me, but it’s not like you can do it again, right?”

“Yeah,” Ray replied. “It drained all the MP I had in Gouz-Maise, so it’s not an option anymore.”

“Then you’re out of moves, huh?” Franklin sneered.

“Nope,” Ray grinned in response. “I can still burn this thing down.”

“...Why, though?” Franklin said. “You should know by now that Purgatorial Flames don’t work on him. I mean, you tried it yourself.”

Franklin spoke nothing but the truth.

“But does it negate *regardless of where I fire*?” Ray asked.

“Ah...” The words made Franklin fall silent.

“Wouldn’t the fire work if it came *from inside*?” Ray added.

Ray believed it was entirely possible that the negation effect was only present on the surface.

“Honestly, if it could really negate the fire no matter what, I don’t think you’d have told me that,” he went on. “I mean... you’re a huge asshole.”

That was Ray’s primary reasoning. He had a feeling that Franklin wouldn’t have said that if the RSK hadn’t had some sort of weakness.

“That’s pointle—” Franklin began.

“Is it? I’ll see it for myself.” With those words, Ray poured all his remaining MP into his Miasmaflame Bracers.

“Wai—!”

“Purgatorial Flames — full power!” Thus, demonic fire began rampaging within the RSK.

They filled its corpus, burst out of its many cracks, and even roared through the hole Ray forced his arm into. The RSK’s body, attacker minions, central nerves, Ray’s left arm — all of it got caught in the crimson blaze.

“Well, my ‘natural enemy...’ let’s test our endurance!” Ray shouted.

“■■■■■■...!” The RSK’s mouthless body released a silent scream as it shook its large frame and swung its tentacles to try and throw Ray off of it.

The abnormality of the situation caused the RSK to break the rule of not attacking Ray by itself.

But Ray was able to stay on anyway by forcing Nemesis in her sword form into one of the RSK's eyes and holding on to her. His back got hit by the tentacles, but he had enough endurance to bear it.

Ray's arm burned and his torso got damaged, causing his HP to drop by the second. But he didn't stop his flames, for he had already decided that he would continue firing until either he or the RSK died.

Right as his limited HP and MP was about to be depleted, for reasons not even he knew...

"GOUZ-MAISE!" Ray shouted the name of the grudge abomination that had turned into his boots, and despite him not intending it, Gouz-Maise *answered*.

Ray's flames had turned the RSK into a gathering of pain and rage — negative emotions fit for Grudge Conversion.

Placed directly on this potent source, the boots were able to absorb the grudge with great efficiency, delivering great amounts of MP to Ray. He instantly used it to empower the flow of the fire and even heal himself.

The greater flames increased the RSK's pain, which, in turn, got converted into MP. It was much like a perpetual motion engine.

However, nothing was perpetual, and something would eventually yield.

And, sure enough, after an amount of time that would have seemed long for some and short for others, something broke.

Surrounded by the crimson blaze, a silhouette crumbled and vanished.



That night, the tians living in Gideon were overcome by fear.

Fiendish-looking monsters were unleashed upon the city, and its streets were ravaged by the battles between Masters.

Some shut themselves in their homes, some took shelter in designated emergency facilities, some just curled up and shook in back alleys, and some were trapped in the arena and shared their worries with others in that situation.

Likely for the purpose of fueling their fear, a live recording was being broadcast to them through several projections in the night sky. They displayed a madman in a lab coat, a large monster, and a mere three Paladins fighting those enemies. The madman claimed that if they didn't defeat the monster within the time limit, countless more beasts would be unleashed upon Gideon and reduce it to rubble.

Naturally, the people's fear escalated, and they began feeling much like criminals waiting to answer the gallows' call. However, despite the overwhelming despair, they still held on to a bit of hope.

After all, the three Paladins were still fighting the enormous

abomination, and their struggle against the odds was more than enough for the people to not give in to despair.

Eventually, the monster and the young man — the sole Master among the three — were both engulfed in flames.

The fire he'd released burned not just the abomination, but himself, as well, and to add to that, the monstrosity's large tentacles were repeatedly attacking him. Despite it all, he didn't give up or show any signs of stopping.

For both those involved and those watching, time seemed to be distorted, feeling long for some and short for others.

However, such differences were inconsequential to the result — the crumbling of a *large silhouette*.

Its ten tentacles fell apart as the sphere-like gathering of flesh exposed its scorched insides and slowly began turning into particles of light. As they scattered and vanished into the wind, the shape of a young man stood up in the midst of it.

His own flames had carbonized his left hand, while the thrashing he'd received from the tentacles had taken its toll, and his equipment no longer held its original shape. And yet, his eyes were still shining with power.

In his right hand, he held a black greatsword which he used to support his body.

Then, he wrung out his remaining energy to raise his right arm up into the air.

As if to tell the scared citizens of Gideon that the fear was no more, or perhaps just to assert his victory, he raised his arm, making him look much like the many arena champions the inhabitants of the duel city were so familiar with.

A moment later, the city of Gideon was drowned in roaring cheers.



To be continued...

Afterword



Cat: “We won! Franklin’s part is over! Hello, this is the control AI you already know well, Cheshiire!”

Xun: “Whoa noW, it ain’t over yEt. And hey, I’m the Master Jiangshi, XunYu.”

Cat: “Brother Bear cannot participate due to certain circumstances.”

Xun: (Certain circumstances...?)

Cat: “We will start this afterword by informing you about something. The manga version of *Infinite Dendrogram*, drawn by the skillful Kami Imai, recently had its first volume released!”

Xun: “I bet thAt tons of novel rEaders are already readiNg it.”

Cat: “The first volume ends with chapter 5, the one that got lots of ironic ‘Is this the final chapter?’ comments on *Niconico Seiga*. Our battle had only just begun!”

Xun: “Stop adding uNtimely endings to sTuff.”

Cat: “If all went smoothly, then chapter 6, the continuation of the first manga volume, should already be up on Comic Fire! We will be very glad if you enjoy this story in both novel and manga form.”

Xun: “Well, with the adVertising done, let’s go bAck to talking about tHis volume.”

Cat: “Yes. Despite what I said at the beginning of the afterword, this incident isn’t over yet.”

Xun: “The latter haLf of the Franklin paRt will be in vOlume 5.”

Cat: “Yep. However, while the latter half was too large to fit into volume 4, it’s also too small to fit into a separate volume, so volume 5 will have new scenes that don’t exist in the webnovel.”

Xun: “We’ll leavE the explanation to the aUthor and his serious commEnt.”

Dear readers, thank you for the purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

Instead of ending the ongoing incident with volume 4, I decided to make it continue into volume 5.

I figured that making the split and adding additional scenes was a better choice than cutting good scenes just so that I could cram it all into a single volume.

After all, Franklin's part has numerous scenes and includes lots of characters, so I wanted the novels to use Taiki's superb drawing ability to portray as many of those characters in as many scenes as possible.

However, this choice wouldn't have been possible if the novel series had gotten canceled on volume 4.

Thanks to your support, dear readers, we have plans to continue the series further. *You* are the ones that allowed me to make this choice, and I simply can't thank you enough for it.

That aside, I have something to say about this volume.

It portrays the battles between people who are "similar, but unlike."

There are those who began playing *Dendro* for the sake of their creations: the manga artist, Marie, and the composer, Veldorbell.

There are those who are friends with Ray and are both indecisive in their own ways: Hugo and Rook.

Ray, who uses all he has to seize the possibilities, and Franklin, who has used everything he has to win.

It's safe to say that this volume was all about such similar people fighting for what they couldn't give up on.

Rather than the amount of powers or the knowledge needed to win, the results of their fights could have actually been decided by their mental strength.

After all, it was Ray's unbreakable will that allowed him to defeat his natural enemy and pull victory from the fiery maw.

The only reason why Taiki's wonderful illustration displaying the final scene of the battle could go at the end of the volume was thanks to the split which, again, could only happen because of you — the readers.

I will continue to do my best to answer to your expectations.

Just as you've already been informed, the next volume will contain scenes that weren't in the original webnovel. Up until now, I've been doing primarily sorting and editing of parts too personal or verbose, so this would be my first major addition to the novel.

Little would make me happier than your excitement for the conclusion to this incident in volume 5.

Cat: “So there, please wait for volume 5.”

Xun: “It’s alrEady decided when it reLeases, though.”

Cat: “...Ah! *Infinite Dendrogram* volume 5 is—!”

Xun: “Volume 5 is sEt to come out sOon! Look forwaRd to it!”

Cat: “I thought I’d get to say it this time! You thieving cat!”

Xun: “*You’re* the caT here. By the waY, Cheshire.”

Cat: “Mrrgh, I didn’t get to announce it even once... Well, what is it?”

Xun: “Why didn’t thE bear partiCipate in this afterWord?”

Cat: “He said he’s on standby for volume 5.”

Xun: “...AlreaDy?!”

Bonus Short Stories

A certain day of a certain month, a certain place in Tenchi

“Hmm... What should I do about this?”

That day, Marie was sitting at her table in her private quarters, very concerned about something.

She had yet to acquire Death Shadow, the Superior Job of the onmitsu grouping. She was still just a high-rank job, Shadow.

Marie currently lived in a ninja village and spent her days going through “training” quests. To get fully immersed into her role as Marie Adler, the protagonist of her work, she needed to acquire the necessary ninja-like skills.

The thing that had her concerned was a particular skill.

It wasn’t any of the onmitsu grouping’s job skills. What bothered her was the new skill she’d acquired on her Embryo, Arc-en-Ciel.

She murmured, “Phantasmal Raingun — Arc-en-Ciel...’ what it does is very clear, but...”

Arc-en-Ciel’s ultimate skill was an enhancement of its basic ability — the creation and firing of bullet creatures. With it, her shots could become significantly more powerful.

That wasn’t all. Marie could also draw the bullets using any of her paints to control the abilities of the output bullet creatures, which made it a highly versatile skill, albeit a bit costly.

“But... Hmm...”

The skill itself wasn’t bad at all, but Marie was concerned that *it didn’t suit Marie Adler*.

The Marie Adler that she’d portrayed in *Into the Shadow* was a so-called finesse-based professional killer who could match the abnormal killers with superpowers thanks to her wisdom and technique.

However, having a skill like Phantasmal Raingun in her arsenal brought her into the same realm as the abnormal killers. She’d already thought that the gun firing standard bullet creatures was a bit iffy, but she’d been able to convince herself that it was a replacement for the gun Marie used in *Into the Shadow*. But alas, she couldn’t find any such excuses for the ultimate skill.

“I can see that it’s strong, but I feel like using it will make the Marie within me less... clear.”

Instead of using her role-playing tone, Marie spoke her worries as

herself, Nagisa Ichimiya.

“I’d never have to worry about something like this if I roleplayed Daisy.”

Daisy, AKA “Daisy Scarlet the Explosion Murder,” was one of the characters in *Into the Shadow*. She was an abnormal killer that appeared early in the story and was basically a vampire that could transform into explosions instead of mist.

Though Marie Adler had defeated her, Daisy had come back to life due to her vampiric nature, only to die again. This had repeated a few times until, eventually, she’d become Marie’s ally. After that, she had turned into somewhat of a joke character who almost always died to the new enemy they faced.

Despite that treatment, Daisy still had a lot of popularity, and even Nagisa herself was quite fond of her.

“If Daisy... Ah.”

Upon remembering the character, Nagisa was hit with an idea and instantly began drawing using red and black paint.

A few minutes later, her work was done, and she had a picture of the same “Daisy Scarlet the Explosion Murder” she’d just been thinking about.

“...This is it!”

Upon looking at the result, Nagisa... Marie put up a bright smile, as though her worries had all but vanished.

And so, Marie had figured how to use her ultimate skill, Phantasmal Raingun. It would be a power that “fired the abnormal killers Marie had become allied with in *Into the Shadow*,” which covered both its function as a skill and her roleplaying needs.

A certain day of a certain month, Hugo Lesseps

“So this is the world of *Infinite Dendrogram*...”

That day marked Hugo Lesseps’s AKA Yuri Gautier’s first login to *Infinite Dendrogram*. She’d chosen the Dryfe Imperium as her starting point and appeared in the imperial capital, Vandelheim.

“Wow... The smells and atmosphere is just like in real life... Hm?”

Like many players, she started out overwhelmed by the game’s degree of reality, but then she noticed something off.

The point of view is a bit high... Oh.

Suddenly, it all came back to her.

She was no longer the junior high school girl known as “Yuri Gautier.” She’d become Hugo Lesseps, the man representing her ideal.

He was about 30cm taller than her, and the leg length that came with this height made it somewhat uncomfortable for her to walk.

Not only that, but...

“...They’re gone.”

She touched her chest, which held, quite obviously, a masculine set of pectoral muscles.

Yuri didn’t care about that all that much. She wasn’t exactly well-endowed, so the only real difference here was the softness or lack of it.

However, she didn’t know what to make of the area *below*.

“...It’s there.”

Though she didn’t touch it by hand, she could feel something between her legs whenever she tried to walk, and it certainly wasn’t a sensation she had in real life.

I’m not sure if this is how it actually is for men... but I feel it.

She could hardly believe that the game could actually make her — a girl — get to know the feeling of having male genitals. *Infinite Dendrogram*’s technology impressed her to the point of making chills go down her spine.

Yuri then remembered the words of the control AI that had guided her through the tutorial process.

“Keep in mind that picking the gender opposite of yours in reality can make you feel really uncomfortable.”

Yes, that’s what that “Duchess” control AI told me.

And Yuri had already come to know this discomfort very well.

“But I can’t let this stop me.”

She had something she wanted to do in this world, and for that, she could easily overcome this slight problem.

“Okay. I’ll start with tone. I have to sound more like a chivalric knight.”

After saying that, she took a moment to practice. In real life, she often pretended to be a theater actress, so she had a far easier time getting used to a change of tone than the change of body.

“This should be good enough. Anyway, I should go and meet up with her. If I recall correctly, I’m supposed to go to the capital’s adventurers’ guild,” she spoke with a tone she considered knightly and chuckled a little bit. “Heh. I reckon my appearance will really surprise her.”

Anticipating the other person’s reaction, Yuri... Hugo made “his” way towards the place they were supposed to meet.

Those were her first steps as Hugo Lesseps.

Due to the other person also looking completely unlike herself in real life, they needed several hours to finally meet up, but that was a story for another time.

I felt like I was spending a lot of my recent time making plots to help the imperium annex the kingdom.

It was all because the previous war hadn't been enough to end it all.

We'd defeated most of their main forces, but Caldina's intervention had prevented us from finishing the job. Therefore, I was now making plots that would allow us to get it all done before Caldina could make their move.

"To do that... I should kill someone," I said.

The target I had in mind was Liliana Grandria.

She was a Paladin and the current vice commander — the de facto leader — of the Knights of the Royal Guard.

In terms of battle ability, she was nothing for us to fear. Sure, her father had been the previous Celestial Knight, and she probably had much in the ways of talent, but it was highly unlikely that she could become a threat by the time the next war began.

However, she was wildly popular.

Liliana's family had been close to the princesses since their parents' generation, and the kingdom's knights had unwavering trust in her. In addition to that, her bloodline had a little bit of something that could prove troublesome.

The biggest problem of all, though, was the fact that she was popular not just among tians, but Masters, as well.

In fact, the current no. 2 in the kingdom's clan rankings was the merger of both her and the princesses's fan clubs: the Altimia, Elizabeth, Theresia, and Liliana Union, AKA the "AETL Union."

As stupid as it sounded, without the kingdom's Superiors or Tsukuyo Fuso's Lunar Society taking part, these maniacs were the most powerful force on their side.

...Well, they'd also had duel rankers like Masked Riser the "Kamen Rider" and Bishmal the "Raging Blaze," but they were too few to be relevant.

"I should get rid of as many of their forces as I can," I decided.

The AETL Union had caused us to use more of our armies than necessary and slowed down our invasion. So, I'd chosen to get rid of their reason to fight.

Though some would turn vengeful and attack us with more ferocity, there would be just as many who'd just quit. After all, to about half of those there, Liliana was just "an NPC they liked."

"The most effective way to get rid of their battle potential would be killing the first princess, but that's not exactly something the imperator would allow..." I murmured.

And when the first princess's future was considered, the other two princesses were off-limits, too. Even in our plans for Gideon, we'd only keep it at kidnapping.

"Well, that plan is all the more reason to kill Liliana," I decided. "Make sure she doesn't get in the way and all."

I chose to start with the orthodox approach — poisoning. And if that didn't work, I'd have her get overwhelmed by the Demi-Dragon Worms hiding in the kingdom.

"I'm going to Gideon, anyway. Might as well pay a visit to the capital and set a trap for her."

After saying that, I put my plans in order, sealed Liliana's fate, and went to log out.

I had no means of knowing that this decision of mine would begin my unpleasant connection to a certain newbie.

To be continued in Episode One.

Chapter Semis: Brother Bear's Welcoming Party Preparations

2045, March 16th, 9:00 A.M.

That day, Shuichi Mukudori was sitting in his living room and talking with his little brother while watching the morning news on his wall-sized monitor.

"Oh, you're finally starting *Dendro*?" he asked.

"Yeah. I've finished moving, so no better time than now, I thought," his brother answered.

"Ha ha. That's great and all, but make sure not to get too addicted. You don't want to neglect the college you worked so hard to get into, right?"

"Well, yeah. I know that much."

"Let's meet up, all right? I'll prepare a welcome party."

"All right."

"It's decided, then. I'll wait in the Kingdom of Altar's capital."

"Kingd...? What?"

"Find me at the fountain in the central plaza."

Shuichi might or might not have realized that the country name he wasn't familiar with had confused his brother, but he just hung up on him regardless.

"So, now he'll buy the gear, then return home and go through the tutorial... That'll be about two hours here and six hours there... All right, then."

Shuichi stood up from his sofa and stretched his body.

He then looked towards the large monitor, which was now showing the entertainment news. The news anchor was talking about something over a video of a live performance of the worldwide rock star, Rachel Raymuse.

"...As busy as ever, I see."

Shuichi swung his hand and turned off the monitor using its sensor function.

"Well, guess I'll go and prepare," he said.

He left his living room and went to his bedroom, where he kept the hardware for *Infinite Dendrogram*.



On an unrelated note, Shuichi Mukudori had an extremely well-featured body.

His height exceeded 180cm, and he'd kept an admirable balance even as he'd built up his muscles, making him look like a first-class martial artist. He was also paying daily visits to the gym in his apartment to keep himself in shape.

He was quite handsome, as well. So much that his face wouldn't be out of place in the acting industry.

Despite being such a fine figure of a man, however...

"HYAHAAH! The bear hungers! Time to forage for the party!"

...he was now speaking borderline nonsense while clad in a bear suit.

Not a single inch of his splendid body was in sight — even his visage was hidden by the face of the animal.

Shuichi had his reasons for looking like that.

He had to hide his avatar because it looked exactly the same as his real body.

It had turned out that way because of some trouble during his tutorial, and he'd been playing the game in such suits ever since he'd started.

Of course, even if it meant he had to hide his appearance, there was no need for him to talk in such a nonsensical manner. Thus, he used the weird tone and spoke with puns simply *because he wanted to*.

Indeed — in the game, Shuichi Mukudori was the bear-suit-clad Shu Starling.

"All right, so the time here is..."

In real life, it was a bit past nine in the morning, while here, it was a little before dawn. The marketplace was about to open, so he was just in time to do his so-called "foraging."

"Hell yeah! Gonna get these paws full of the stuff!"



First, Shu went to the wholesale produce market.

"Let's start with the capital's favorite remberries. Gotta buy a load of those."

The remberries cultivated in the royal capital were popular in and out of the city. Their rich sweetness and pleasant sourness made them a highly sought-after product.

Shu became worried about a highly unlikely event.

"Hmm, I think I'd feel beary bad if he liked them a lot and wanted more of them, so... all right."

He let this worry guide him to a wholesaler...

"Excuse me, sir. I'd like to buy all the remberries you have today."

"ALL?!"

The seller seemed to be taken aback.

Thus, Shu ended up with an obscene amount of remberries.

Though they'd told him they couldn't sell all of them because they had to give them out to the shops, Shu was able to buy every single remberry that was meant to be sold that day.

After buying a number of other fruits and vegetables, Shu left the produce market with a satisfied smile on his face.

On an unrelated note, a certain bespectacled man that arrived there an hour later was heard panicking and saying, "Sold out?! What the hell do you mean?!"



Then Shu went to a meat shop he was highly familiar with.

"Hey, my guy," he said. "I'm here to get these paws on some meats."

"Well, ain't that a voice I know. So today you're a bear, eh?"

"More or less every day now."

The meat shop dealt primarily in food items dropped from stock-farmed, edible monsters.

Strangely enough, the taste of these drops could differ by specimen, rather than just by monster. The ones looked after by diligent cattle farmers actually produced tastier, better-quality meat. And as always, quality had a direct link to price. Gourmet meat was a luxury, and it wasn't uncommon for a mere 100g to cost 10,000 lir.

Also, monster drops could increase in quantity if the one handling them had high Dismantling. Due to that, the owners of meat shops often raised the level of this skill, raising their own level and getting respectable muscles in the process.

The shopkeeper Shu was acquainted with was no exception. Even though he was fully-clothed, it was easy to tell he had a muscular build.

"Today, I'd like you to give me all the beary high-quality beast, avian, and dragon meat," Shu said. Just like with the remberries, Shu was requesting all the gourmet ingredients the man had for sale. However, the price was significantly greater than before.

"Whoa there, sonny," the man said in a worried manner. "I don't mind selling it all, but that'll cost ya 30,000,000 lir."

"The hungry bear cares not. Today, money is of no matter to me."

Shu didn't hesitate to do away with an amount of money equivalent to 300,000,000 yen.

Though he thought he was merely being considerate of his brother's welcome party, most would agree that he was buying far too much.

And so, after putting the various meats into his inventory, Shu left the meat shop.



“Hm, hm-hmm. Where to next... Nh?”

Whilst whimsically walking to get the other ingredients, Shu noticed something strange.

A single ruined building was facing the street. It was surrounded by a fence, and a sign nearby warned against trespassing and said that the building would soon be demolished. Despite that, however, Shu could hear the laughter of children coming from inside.

Since a part of the fence was missing and because they seemed to be having lots of fun, he assumed that they’d sneaked in to play. However, the building was very aged, and even while standing outside, he could very clearly hear the building creak under their steps.

For now, he chose to merely warn them.

“That’s beary dangerous! Play outside, you cubs!”

“Okaaay!”

“Kyaahhh!”

“Hiiide!”

“Meow!”

The children responded in various ways, but it was very clear they’d heard him.

Shu scratched his face, muttered, “I’ll check on them later,” and went shopping again.



The third shop he went to dealt in fresh fish.

Though it was questionable whether it was really “fresh.” After all, the royal capital was a fair distance away from seas, lakes, or rivers, making it impossible for its inhabitants to fish locally. Most of the city’s water resources came from its plentiful underground water veins.

Despite what most would expect, however, the fish in the capital was edible. This was because it was brought here from the port city in the west using time-stopping inventories. The fish and other seafood was still as fresh as they come, so the distance from water sources was of no issue.

This applied to many other products, as well, which made such inventories a crucial part of the economy.

Anyway, Shu was now staring at a fish tank before the shop.

It was only there to showcase the goods, and the actual products sold would come from the shop's inventories. This method helped chefs and the like get a good look at the fish they would get here.

"Hmmm..."

As serious as one could be about such things, Shu was thinking about what fish to get for the welcoming party. However, all the onlookers only saw a bear, poised to strike at a fish at any given moment.

Feeling great suspense, they actually expected him to throw his paw into the tank and grab one.

In the end, Shu bought lots of ten or so types of fish and several types of crustaceans. Goods imported from the seaside were costly, but again, he spared no expense.

"Will Mr. Bear chew on the salmon?" a young tian asked while pointing at Shu, all stocked up and ready to go.

"Shh! Don't look at it!" the mother scolded the child, concluding the bear man's peculiar shopping trip.



"Vegetables, fruits, meat, seafood... Now, for wheat."

With that in mind, he arrived at the wholesale wheat store.

When it came to grain-based foods, he already had rice, since it was sold as a vegetable. However, the Kingdom of Altar's cuisine was primarily Western, so wheat was a necessity.

"Heyoo, give me your best wheat fur bread and pas...ta?"

Right upon entering, Shu realized that the situation in the store was abnormal.

He saw a masked man point his sword towards an old tian — most likely the owner of the place. There were three other masked men, and they, too, were using their weapons to threaten the employees, customers... and Shu.

"Don't you dare move, or I'll shove this right through your suit!" one of them shouted.

"Come on, you old fart! Bring inventories full of money and food *or else!*"

The situation and their words made it obvious that they were burglars.

"...Fur real? An incident? Now, of all times?" Beneath his suit, Shu made a troubled... no, an annoyed expression.

By wasting his time here, he could end up being late to meet up with his brother, and might not be able to gather enough ingredients.

With that in mind, he acted fast.

"Hey, you suit freak! I told you not to m—"

First, he made one burglar faint with a backhanded blow to the chin, making sure to not blow away half of his face.

Next, instead of going for the one closest to him, Shu went to the side of the one who turned towards him first. Lowering his power so that he wouldn't make the burglar's insides blow up, he launched a straight thrust into his abdomen.

Then, he faced the closest guy next to him and made him trip with a kick. It broke his legs, but — thanks to Shu holding back again — didn't tear them off.

Finally, he went for the one threatening the old man. Before he could turn around, Shu grabbed him into a sleeper hold, making sure not to snap his neck.

"And so, you won't have to bear these losers now," he told the old man.

All four of the burglars were on the ground in a span of only 30 seconds. Only the one with broken legs was conscious, and, naturally, he was screaming.

Anyway, with the little problem gone...

"Your best wheat fur bread and pasta, please."

...Shu returned to his original goal and asked the old man to sell him wheat.

The old man and the employees thanked him by selling the wheat for cheap.

After leaving the burglar handling to them, Shu, satisfied with his deal, went on his way in an exuberant mood.



"I still have some alcohol among the drops I've gathered, and it's not like he'll drink anyway, so we don't really need it. What we *do* need, though, is..."

After getting the wheat, Shu thought he more or less had everything, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something.

He took a moment to think, humming in a strangely bear-like manner, until it finally came to him.

"We need some good ol' H₂O."

He still hadn't gotten the water. With the capital's supply being primarily underground, it could vary heavily in terms of quality. The best water in the city was the one in the noble area — specifically, the royal palace.

"...Guess I'll pay a visit," he said.

And thus, for the sake of his brother's welcome party, Shu decided to sneak into the most important building in the country.

And so, in less than 20 minutes, he was in the deepest reaches of the royal palace.

This didn't mean that the security here was weak.

It was all due to an extremely powerful sneak effect on one of Shu's items.

However, the security around the water source was particularly strong. There were many magical items in place to prevent anyone from poisoning it, and not even Shu's equipment could let him pass by unnoticed.

That's why Shu didn't go to the source.

"Now, bear can I find...?"

He started walking around, looking for a person who could share some of the palace's water with him. After all, he was here to "get" some water, not "steal" it.

Of course, no one reasonable would give something to some bear suit that'd sneaked in here.

That was why he was looking for one of his acquaintances, when suddenly...

"Mister suit?"

...someone saw through his sneak ability and called out to him.

He turned around and saw a strange girl.

She wore fancy nightclothes, had fluffy hair, and looked about the age of an early student in elementary school. None of that was particularly strange. It was her posture that made her curious.

She was riding a strange animal — a hamster the size of a large dog. Though its closed eyes made it look asleep, it had no trouble walking over to Shu.

"Oh, hello, Theresia," Shu said.

He wasn't surprised by their appearance. Though the girl and the hamster weren't the people he was looking for, Shu still knew them well enough.

"Why are you here today?" asked Theresia.

"I came to get some water, but I'm having a beary hard time finding the grand chamberlain."

"Oh, he's talking about something with my sister... but if it's just water you want... very well, I'll try asking for some. Will one barrel be enough?"

"It should be."

"Very well. Leave it to me. They won't find it strange if I tell them it's for Dor," said Theresia as she petted the hamster's head.

The furry creature, its eyes still closed, replied by shaking its whiskers, as if to say, "I do not mind."

"Well thanks," said Shu. "I owe you one fur this."

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Suddenly, he heard footsteps at another part of the hallway and instantly hid himself.

“...Hm?” he murmured.

For reasons unknown, Theresia and the hamster were hiding with him, too.

Soon enough, a maid passed by them, and when she was gone, he turned to the girl.

“Why did you hide with me?” he asked.

“We’re taking a walk while I’m supposed to be in bed,” she replied with a guilty expression.

“...You’re not the healthiest girl, so just bear in mind not to leave the palace.”

“I know. I’m about to go back, anyway. Oh, and I’ll have Dor throw the barrel through the window, so make sure you catch it.”

“Got it,” Shu replied and turned away from her.

He knew where to find her room, so he made his way outside to wait under her window.

“Make sure they do not see you,” said someone behind him in a refined, manly voice. “If you kick up a fuss, they will up the security and make it harder for us to go on walks.”

Shu showed little care for who had said it. He responded by simply raising his right hand and continued walking.

Thus, he parted ways with the girl living at the palace and the mysterious creature at her side.

A short while later, Shu safely got his water barrel and left the royal palace without being discovered once.



“Phew. Now I’m pawsitively ready.”

Fruit, vegetables, meat, seafood, grain, and water. Though it had taken him nearly four hours, Shu had collected all the foods he deemed necessary. They were all fit for a royal banquet, and their total cost exceeded 50,000,000 lir.

That amount of money was certainly heavy on the wallet, even for a veteran player and ranker like Shu. However, he found it a price worth paying. After all, the little brother he’d been impatiently waiting for would finally start *Infinite Dendrogram*, and if that wasn’t a reason to party hard — nothing was.

“...Ah, I almost forgot to reserve a restaurant. I hope Darshan’s place is open today.”

Due to him being a Master, the place run by the Star Chef — the cook grouping Superior Job for Western food — had irregular opening

times. Nevertheless, it was immensely popular due to his food being significantly better than any of his competitors, and because he was open to using the ingredients brought by the customers.

“Ah, looks like he’s online,” Shu said after he opened his friends list. “Time fur a visit, then.”

And thus, he went straight to the Star Chef’s place.

On a related note, *Infinite Dendrogram* had no built-in long-distance chat function between friends. Such communication requires relevant spells or magic items meant for this purpose.

Many players complained that it was inconvenient and had asked the developers to implement it, but it doesn’t seem like they intended to do so anytime soon.

Due to this and many other cases where the developers didn’t seem to consider game-like convenience and logic, some players called them neglectful.

The restaurant Shu was aiming for was open, so he quickly made a reservation.

Upon accepting the many ingredients Shu prepared, the owner laughed and expressed his excitement over working on them.

And with that, the preparations were done.



Now, to wait for Reiji to finally log in, Shu thought as he made his way towards the fountain they’d agreed to meet at.

“...Wait, I gave him the place and all, but how will we confirm that we’re each other?”

Reiji and Shuichi didn’t know each other’s avatars, which would make it impossible for them to meet.

“Should I sing? He could tell it’s me by my voice,” he said.

Shu’s idea was sub-optimal, since the sight of a singing bear might make his brother ignore him even if he did realize it was him.

“All right, let’s start the vocal exercise... hm?”

Suddenly, Shu noticed something at the side of the street — the ruined building from before.

He’d purposely taken the path going through it just to see if something was wrong, and apparently, there was. Several children were looking at the building from outside the fence, and they all looked very worried.

“A grizzly situation, I assume?” Shu asked, surprising the children. Some looked scared of him, while others seemed relieved.

“U-Umm...”

“Th-The house is gonna fall, and Thomas is stuck there.”

Those words and the state of the building gave Shu all the information he needed.

The structure was even more tilted than before, and the creaking had turned even louder.

The building reached its limit while the children were playing inside, and while most of them escaped, one was still there.

“All right, then.”

Shu acted fast.

He pulverized the fence, jumped inside the grounds and charged towards the building, ready to save the child. However, the boy he was going to save came out at about the same time, wailing loudly and holding a cat in his hands. He sped towards the exit, but before he could make it to safety, the building began to collapse.

Losing all that remained of its structural integrity, the roof fell towards the boy and was about to crush him when...

“First form.”

“Ready.”

...an artillery shell made of light completely blew it away.

The destruction was instant and absolute.

The roof was a roof no longer. It didn't even leave any fragments. It was reduced to such a state that its molecules could never bond again.

Indeed, it was *destroyed* so thoroughly that it was no longer able to have any integrity as physical material.

The shell that had made it happen had been fired by the cannon that'd suddenly appeared on Shu's left arm.

Much like some device made by the cat robot from that world-famous anime, the cannon replaced his left hand.

“...Safe,” he said in satisfaction. “But man, nothing beats this one. At least *when it comes to pure firepower*, anyway.”

It was the first form of Baldr, Shu's Embryo.

He'd realized that the boy wouldn't make it in time, so he saved him by destroying the roof. Of course, a normal artillery shell would've made the damage even worse. But Shu had known he'd save the boy if he'd combined his Baldr with a particular job skill.

“Good thing I didn't switch it off. My heart's beating so fast I can hardly bear it...”

At least, he'd *assumed* he'd be able to save the boy, and it had simply happened that he'd been successful.

“Eh? Huh...?”

“Meow...?”

The boy and the cat in his hands looked like they had no idea

what had just happened.

Covered in dust raised by the building's collapse, they both had expressions thick with astonishment.

The same applied to the worried children outside.

"Did you learn your lesson, cubs?" said Shu. "No more playing in places you're not allowed to."

After Shu scolded the boys and girls, they finally took in the situation and started crying out loud, either due to relief, fear, or both.



After that predicament, Shu comforted the children while making his way towards the fountain where he was supposed to wait for his brother.

As he carried or let them climb on him, the children quickly stopped crying and began laughing cheerfully. They were on him even when he sat down at the edge of the fountain. The sight soon attracted even more children, and he was soon treated as a bear-shaped playground.

Shu let them do as they pleased and began making something.

In his hand, he held some wooden remains he'd took from the ruined building.

After linking a rod with a board, he wrote something on the latter.

"Welcome little brother"

Shu believed this would be more than enough for his brother to recognize him. He got the idea when he was looking at the sign telling people to keep away from the ruined building.

And thus Shu, swarmed by children, held the sign and waited for his little brother for about an hour.

End



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